STATO MAGGIORE DELL'ESERCITO
UFFICIO STORICO

MARIO MONTANARI

THE THREE BATTLES OF EL ALAMEIN

(June - November 1942)

PARTE SECONDA

ROMA 2007

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FOREWORD

This monograph focuses on the military events which took place in the western Egyptian desert in the summer and fall of 1942.

It is an abridged edition of the third volume entitled *El Alamein (January-November 1942)* of the work *Operations in North Africa* written by General Montanari and published by the Historical Office of the Army General Staff.

As its title suggests, this monograph deals with the culminating moments of the fighting conducted overseas by the Italo-German troops against those of the British Commonwealth. On the one side, there was Rommel, by then a legend, and on the other, Auchinleck and Montgomery.

Victory seemed at hand for a short while, but it soon became evident that daring and boldness alone could not enable the Axis to overcome the difficulties and obstacles hindering operations, due to insufficient logistics.

In the late Spring of 1942, the issue of choosing between Malta and Tobruk as a stronghold was settled in favour of the latter, although this decision was not unanimously agreed upon.

In July, all expectations were shattered by the events in the bottleneck of El Alamein and cancelling Operation C3 was bitterly regretted in the following evaluations of the conduct of the war in the Mediterranean theatre, triggering many debates and harsh criticism.

Apart from all controversies and hindsight judgement(s), which were groundless and therefore useless, the events in El Alamein on the African front and in Stalingrad on the eastern front marked a watershed in the conflict, when the strategic initiative of the Axis was stopped and the advance of the Allies gained momentum.

This very detailed study by General Montanari, whom the Historical Office wishes to thank, is mainly based on the official documents of the erstwhile enemies and also takes into account the reports and memories of those who took part in the events at all levels.

It is superfluous to highlight the importance of the battle of El Alamein whose events and strategic repercussions are well-known. We lost, but we lost honourably and, as the author pointed out, should be proud of it.

CONVENTIONAL SYMBOLS

used in the sketches and maps

Conventional symbols were employed by the Italian Army and are still in use today. They are as follows:

1. *Basic symbols:*

Unit	
Headquarters	
Logistic or Administrative Installation	
Logistic Headquarters	

2. *Role indicators:*

Infantry	
Bersaglieri	
Armoured Troops	
Cavalry	
Artillery	
Engineer Corps	
Motorized Troops	

3. *Size indicators:*

Army	XXXX
Army Corps	XXX
Division	XX
Brigade	X
Regiment/Group	III
Battalion	II
Company	I

To indicate a tactical group the symbol is used above the size indicator.

4. *Unit indicators:*
The number corresponding to the size indicator represented is put to the right of the unit symbol in which the division in question is framed.

E.g. 2 5 indicates the 2nd Battalion
of the 5th Infantry Regiment

5. *Nationality indicators:*
Where necessary, the following initials are used to the right of the base symbol: IT: Italy; GE: Germany; UK: Great Britain; AU: Australia; NZ: New Zealand; FR: France; PO: Poland.

INITIALS

AIT	Italo-German Army
ACIT	Italo-German Armoured Army
CTA	German Corps of Africa
DAK	*Deutsches Afrikakorps*
Delease	Supreme Command Delegation in North Africa
DSCS	Historical Diary of the Supreme Command
DSCSAS	Historical Diary of the High Command North Africa
OBS	*Oberbefehlshaber Sud*
OKH	*Oberkommando des Heeres*
OKW	*Oberkommando der Wehrmacht*
SKL	*Seekriegsleitung*
SMRE	Royal Army General Staff
USSMA	Historical Office of the General Staff of the Air Force
USSME	Historical Office of the General Staff of the Army
USSMM	Historical Office of the General Staff of the Navy

Chapter four

OPERATIONAL BREAK

1. The Italian Military Situation

Cavallero searched for solutions, at least partial ones, to the numerous questions at hand. He, however, had neither necessary nor sufficient means at his disposal. In this way, the 1943 program conceived for the expansion of the army had been based on a minimum of thirty divisions, but the available means did not allow for meeting the requirements; the monthly production of tanks was supposed to rise from 85 to 125 but, if Germany did not intervene with a supply of raw materials and coal, there would not be hope for increase. There were various operational hypotheses pointed out (an advance in France, occupation of Tunisia, occupation of Corsica), but the impossibility of solving the problems concerning motor vehicles and drivers was well-known. The intention was to put Malta under pressure again, but everybody knew that Germany was the only one able to carry out the bulk of such an enterprise.

The plan was to increase to 375 the monthly production of airplanes, which in the meantime had decreased from the 350 planned aircraft to 244, due to the lack of raw materials and workers (though Favagrossa pointed out that the Air Force had never collected the whole quota assigned to them). Nevertheless, the lack of special steel and aluminium led, as usual, to a dependence on Germany's good will.

The 1943 naval program, introduced by Riccardi, due to begin *about* mid-1943 and be completed by 1944, was founded mainly on its *"imperious necessity of preparing at least a second aircraft carrier - besides* Aquila, *which was being assembled - in order to face the demands of the war in the Mediterranean but, above all, in order to be ready to act in the oceans"* (!) and on the urgency of replacing the 27 torpedo-boat destroyers and 50 submarines lost since the beginning of the war. But the monthly assignment of raw materials was not enough to handle the planned construction and it was a known fact that, from the beginning of January 1943, Favagrossa had reduced the monthly quotas by 15%.

The increase in production in various sectors was being boosted but, for instance, the total sales of the Fiat group in the first semester of 1942 (1,910 million) was almost identical to the one of the same period of 1941 (1,900 million) and production in 1942 was notably inferior to what had been estimated.

On the 7th of September, Cavallero discussed the army subject with Ambrosio, Favagrossa, Scuero and others. The calculations contemplated thirty divisions, including four armoured, to be ready in spring 1943. Apparently, the meeting did not come up with anything concrete except for the usual list of materials to be required from Germany. Cavallero himself observed disappointedly that the anti-tank weaponry was so deficient that *"chances are that we will end up with mixed Italo-German units"* and the actual availability of raw materials *"was not even enough to face the needs of twenty divisions;"* that the production of aluminium was around 2,600 tons a month, 2,500 of which were absorbed by the Air Force; that special steel, aluminium and special lumber were running out, as were copper, zinc and lead. Despite all this, Mussolini received the plan.

One gets a strange feeling looking through those documents and annotations regarding that complex matter. On the one hand, there was an outline of depressing numbers, which nobody could underestimate; on the other, there was confidence, or even the demand for the ally to intervene and fill in the gaps. Cavallero was well aware of the difficulties, but his opinion quite often did not reflect reality. For instance, on 1 September, he had examined the possibility of a breach into Southern France, affirming that *"if we move, we must reach the Rhone first. In spring we shall have to be prepared to advance up to the Pyrenees!"* It is true that, in the light of Ambrosio's objections, he concluded: *"There are no resources. We will deal with this problem later"*[1], nevertheless, one must wonder if, circumstances being as they were, it was wise to even play with the idea of opening a new operational front.

Favagrossa, right or wrong, had the impression that Cavallero was excessively optimistic and that he had infected Mussolini. Considering that during the meetings of the heads of General Staff, he did not succeed in imposing a more cautious program, he submitted and illustrated a long and detailed memo to the Duce. Considering the impossibility of increasing the national production of raw materials (which in 1942 were already inferior to those in 1941), it became essential to ask Germany to increase the granted or anticipated quota of supplies for the current year: a medium 150% increase of the most important materials (except coal and steel), with a maximum of 1,500% for aluminium! In all likelihood, Germany was not in a position to grant such requests, because during the negotiations in Brioni the previous August, the German representatives had pointed out their increasing difficulties and, consequently, predicted not even

[1] Cavallero's diary, 1/9/1942.

being able to match the levels reached in 1942. After all, on 1 September, Germany was behind schedule in supplies from 1942 by 2.5 months for coal, 3 months for iron materials, manganese and glycerine, 6 months for aluminium, 12 months (!) for chrome, etc.

Even if the requests had been granted, Italy would have had to draw the workers required by the industry from military forces and, even worse, quickly complete the works in progress in order to prepare the new plants, in a moment when allied aerial bombardments were raging over the existing ones.

Essentially, concluded Favagrossa, where the army was concerned, new divisions would not be strengthened nor new armoured divisions be created. The anti-aircraft defence, which was already in pitiful conditions[2], would not be improved and it would not be possible to grant the supplying of ammunition as planned. The other two armies were a little better off, except for the difficulty in retrieving aluminium, copper and special steel. The merchant navy, instead, was worse off and was forced to cancel the whole 1943 program (14 motor vehicles and 5 steamboats of 10,000 tons, 3 motor vessels of 4,800 tons, 5 2,100 ton steamboats and few other units)[3].

Mussolini had attentively followed Favagrossa's report, but he had the impression that it was veiled by a marked pessimism. Favagrossa asked for a meeting with Cavallero over the whole matter.

The meeting took place in the evening of 27th September. According to Favagrossa, the conversation, which lasted two hours, was not carried out in a calm atmosphere, and yet in the end *"I felt calmer. It seemed I had clearly demonstrated that German help could not be depended on and that it was therefore necessary to think about a way to put an end to war"*[4]. Anything is possible, but the minutes of the meeting do not state that such

[2] Italy had immediately requested a certain number of radars for its anti-aircraft defence and night fighting from Germany which had a large, ever upgraded supply. The Technical High Committee for Arms and Ammunition, in charge of anti-aircraft defence, had even taken an interest with *Telefunken* in their construction, but the ministries of Corporations and Communication opposed it, because they were concerned with national competition. The most qualified Italian companies were therefore contacted (Marelli, Safar and Allocchio Bacchini), and had already dealt with the issue of their own accord; they agreed to supply their model by 31 October 1942. The electromechanical part had already been defined and approved. General Ago though, wrote on September 22nd that *"even in the best case scenario it will take quite a long time to develop a sufficient quantity of aircraft"*. As can be imagined, the issue depended on the assignment of raw materials and craftsmanship.

[3] Prom. 15921 S.P. dated 20/9/1942 *"1943 Program for Armed Forces and Merchant Navy"* in CARLO FAVAGROSSA, *Perché perdemmo la guerra*, Milan, Rizzoli, 1946 pp. 176-181.

[4] C. FAVAGROSSA, *op. cit.*, p. 181.

a position was taken. Cavallero's conclusion was nevertheless optimistic about the Navy and Air Force, not so about the Army.

> *"Our present situation with raw materials"*, he affirmed, *"doesn't allow us to complete the expansion of the 20 divisions on the Russian and Egyptian front. Moreover, we cannot plan the expansion of another 10 divisions as necessary"*.

Taking it into consideration, the measures outlined in the field of operational tasks were of great importance. Mussolini liked to appear as a strategist. He began to examine the western front which, in his opinion, spread from Europe to Africa. It was divided in three sectors: the Alps, the islands and Tripolitania. Cavallero immediately brought up the problem of how to remove at least two divisions from the French border and transfer them to Libya (the armoured division, *Centauro,* and the motorized division, *Piave)*. The transfer could take place as soon as the air force pressure over Malta started again. Naturally, one must not consider the dispatch of the *La Spezia* Infantry Division, which had been scheduled since the 30th of September, due to the requirements of the Libyan Sahara. This way, the most important demands were satisfied, while during winter, steps were to be taken to carry out *"the program that was being planned"*.

Everybody so far agreed upon this general line of conduct; but, at this point, a new matter was to be widely discussed. Mussolini talked about increasing the production of the M15 tanks, before making any plans about the P40s and Cavallero made two separate points about the matter to him. First: as the 15-ton M15 tank was already outmoded due to its inadequate armament (a 47 mm gun), it would be preferable to increase the production of 75 mm calibre self-propelled guns, *"keeping in mind the relevant directives of the Duce"*, and speed up production of the (25-ton) P40 tank[5]. It is hard to accept the idea that the M15, which should have been considered insufficient (compared to the German and British ones) from the moment it was designed, was only now declared *"practically outdated"* and the only remedy suggested by the head of the General Staff was *"P40 production should be accelerated"*. It would have been better to make a definite and more timely decision in favour of the P40, which was

[5] On 28/1/1943 Mussolini called a military summit at *Palazzo Venezia,* where he stated that *"our M 15 is obsolete. I should have been to Africa to assess that its mechanics break down, either for a flaw in construction or for the bad quality raw materials"*. A dramatic sentence but meaningless. The fact that the M 15 was obsolete depended on other factors: engine power, armour, speed, gun calibre.

designed by Fiat Ansaldo in 1940, but not completed until 1943 because of a desire to have it reach maximum performance. However, in order to be able to express a conclusive judgment on the whole event, one should thoroughly examine the research process, projects and works, restrictions issued by and to the industry and the delivery time demanded by the Central Authority. But due to the lack of documentation, what can be definitely stated is the unpleasant sensation of deficiency at all levels: decisional, organizational and technical[6].

The second point: Cavallero pointed out that the preparation of a new armoured division had many other problems. Now, the needs of war often lead to dilemmas. In this case, the question was whether to supply the existing divisions with a wide margin and assured timeliness (tactical advantage) or to create new divisions with a less than satisfying supply (strategic advantage, so to speak). Even the Germans and the British came to a fork in the road in many circumstances. As for Italy, it was believed, due to Cavallero's admissions, that it would not be possible to think about building further large armoured or motorized units. The inability of keeping organic levels for the *Ariete, Littorio* and *Trieste* Divisions, the painful impossibility of setting up the *Giovani Fascisti* Armoured Division, already named so in the theatre of operations, the difficulty of production, the disastrous disparity between the level of consumption and the level of supplies were well-known to everybody. One must also add that the *"other problems"* cited by Cavallero were really *numerous*: the unavailability of trained officers and NCOs, specialised personnel such tank drivers, pilots, means of transmission, reconnaissance vehicles, anti-tank guns, and motor vehicles. On the other hand, Cavallero wrote in his diary only three weeks before:

> "My criterion is to supply the existing divisions, but without increasing their number. Their present armament is insufficient. The equipment of our divisions is not suitable to the current war requirements"[7].

[6] Studies on the P 40, designed in 1939, had started in 1940. In the next phase its weight was increased from 23 to 25 tons, its front armour from 40 to 50 mm and its side armour from 30 to 40 mm. The first model, carrying a 78/18 cannon, was made in March 1942. Later a gun of the same calibre, but more effective firepower, was studied. This was the 75/34 (which used the 75/32 field gun ammunition) and, in May 1942, 500 such tanks were ordered. Production was to start at a pace of 10 tanks by March 1943, gradually increasing to 50 from August onwards. On 27 November 1942, General von Horstig, after a meeting between Cavallero and von Thoma, asked for technical information about the P 40 on the OKW's behalf: the blueprint and its terms and its requirements of raw materials, in order to have a complete technical picture and decide accordingly.

[7] Cavallero's diary, 3/9/1942.

It is true that he was essentially talking about infantry, but the concept was valid for all divisions.

As for the meeting of 27 September, Mussolini realised that the prospects were not good at all for the armoured divisions. He therefore... invited everybody to *"take the necessary steps with the German authorities"*. Cavallero answered he had already informed the OKW, which *"took time in order to first complete the operations on the eastern front with no negative opposition"*. One can understand how much hope might have been placed in such an answer if one knows the breaking news coming from Berlin. On 24 September, the head of OKH, General Halder, was dismissed and replaced by General Zeitler; three weeks before, on exactly 10 September, Field Marshal List, the commander of the "A" army group, was dismissed too and replaced by General von Kleist.

To tell the truth, Mussolini also considered the hypothesis that *"the ally may not give us significant help"*, but no mention was made about it and the discussion was postponed to four days later for a plenary session.

On 1st October there was a military summit conference at *Palazzo Venezia*. Mussolini had another chance to demonstrate his inability to understand the fundamental terms of the military problems. The Duce conducted the meeting by trying to impress with categorical enunciations and suitable phrases about what should be done (ignoring the real possibility of doing it) and unjustified optimism, and instead of facing up to the excessive dispersion of the war efforts in regards to the actual Italian capabilities, he let things carry on as they had so far.

He started by highlighting the pre-eminence of the North African theatre of operations over the other three (Russia, the Balkans, the western Alps), where ten more divisions were needed on the Egyptian front and other units were bound by the defence of Tripolitania, and the possible occupation of Tunisia, at any sign of an allied landing. Once he had taken stock of the situation of the Italian Army, he concluded that they needed to strengthen the ten divisions operating in Egypt; keep the highest degree of efficiency for the ten divisions in Russia and explore the possibility of increasing their number; equip and organise the divisions arrayed on the western front; supply the divisions spread in the Balkans as needed; place three divisions in Tripolitania.

As for the Navy, Mussolini admitted that, on the 27th and 28th of August, the first part of the sea battle had been lost, since three steamers and one motor ship loaded with fuel for the Italo-German Army had been sunk, and that the heaviest losses were recorded in the light fleet and the

submarines. He also confessed his regret for having once opposed (fifteen or sixteen years before) the construction of aircraft carriers, as he believed they would only be advantageous if Italy were involved in naval operations beyond the Strait of Gibraltar. He was now convinced that it was inconceivable to engage in battle without such ships, even in the Mediterranean, as they constituted "*the umbrella of our naval forces*". As for the direction of the building program, he underlined that the 10,000-ton cruiser was already outmoded, as its principle means of defence was speed, and it was now slower than the enemy's; that the pocket submarines had offered modest overall results and that, in order to operate in the Mediterranean Sea, motor torpedo boats had to reach about 60-80 tons.

As for the Air Force, there were difficulties with production, due to the continuous transformation of planes, both fighters and bombers. For example, the Macchi 200 fighter plane evolved into 202 and then into 205. Besides, the S79 turned out being unsuitable for employing sea torpedoes. What was needed was suitable aircraft equipped with special torpedoes, dive bombers, and airplanes for normal transportation and for paratroopers. The heavy losses suffered by the Merchant Marine (900,000 tons) illustrated the matter of adjustment and development with extreme seriousness. In the end, with regard to raw materials, Mussolini only focused on some aspects: 100,000 more tons of coal needed to be extracted each month. As compensation, the electric energy situation, which had been worrying until mid-September, seemed to have improved. Mussolini also remarked that the nagging worry was due to the scarcity of diesel oil, and tried to soften resentment toward toward his ally: *"There is no malice"*, he said, "*if the German part is not able to keep its promises*".

After this statement, the leaders concerned were called to speak. Favagrossa illustrated the course of the production, indicating the most deficient sectors: coal, aluminium, copper and manganese. Fougier listed the raw materials needed to increase the aircraft production from 250 to 300 a month. Riccardi presented data related to the naval program, concluding that the assignments had to be doubled. Ambrosio reported that, in order to put thirty divisions on their feet (four less that those required by Mussolini), the Italian Army would need a monthly increase of 27,000 tons of iron and steel materials and of 1,000 tons of copper. Ago confronted the pressing argument of tanks, reporting that the production could only increase to 120 a month in January 1943 and up to 150 in the following March, provided that the raw materials, fuel and skilled workers were guaranteed.

After this quite distressing panorama, Mussolini stated that "*he had the impression that, by intensifying the effort, obtaining something from*

Germany, especially in regards to coal and steel, and with a better exploitation of raw materials, it would be possible to supply, perhaps not 100%, but a great extent of the1943 program".

Cavallero intervened and observed that, if the calculations made by Favagrossa were right, it would not only be impossible to strengthen the additional fourteen divisions planned for 1943, but even to complete the twenty divisions operating on the Egyptian and Russian fronts. Things being as they were, he concluded, the distribution model proposed just for guidance by Favagrossa was evidently unacceptable, and he proposed that within a month's time *"The Supreme Command and the War Builders had to contact the people concerned wherever needed, and face up to the requirements of raw materials through a suitable distribution. After that, one would review the situation every two months and act accordingly, on a case by case basis"*. Then, he specified that the distribution of raw materials had an operational character, and affirmed: *"The collaboration between The Supreme Command and the War Builders assures that the distribution of raw materials available will in every moment correspond to the vision that the Supreme Command has about the requirements relevant to the development of war operations, based on the Duce's instructions"*. Naturally, Mussolini quickly expressed his approval.

Then there was the question of the specialised workmen whose request for exemptions was quite relevant. In that moment, according to Scuero, the Italian Army had called up the classes from 1908 to 1923 included, for a total of 2,800,000 soldiers, 300,000 of whom active combatants. Mussolini remarked that Cavallero had told him about 40-50,000 exemptions, which he did not consider excessive. And that is the way the matter ended[8].

The Duce's conclusion is self-explanatory. He declared *"he was very satisfied with the interesting meeting"* and expressed *"hope that soon even the remaining uncertainties would be sorted out"*. He then revealed that all of the exposed deficiencies rested on the fact that Italy, according to the agreements, was only supposed to go to war in 1942, but *"History"*, he announced *"cannot choose its timetable nor its itineraries. If autarchy had been boosted in 1925, the problem would now be resolved!"*[9].

In the days that followed, there was a string of measures issued, based on what had emerged during the meeting. In the sector of armaments, an integration of M15 tanks with a greater apportion of self-propelled

[8] Actually, the exemptions concerned 21,130 cases, 18,683 of which for factories under War Builders supervision and 2,447 for military plants, against the 24,467 that had been requested.

[9] Cavallero's diary, minutes of the 1/10/1942 meeting.

artillery was arranged; it was decided to cancel or decrease the production of L6 tanks and convert them into ammunition carrying vehicles; it was also settled that the production of armoured cars would be increased in order to complete the *Ariete* and *Littorio* divisions.

In the regulating sector, it was decided to prepare 5,000 reserves a month to supply the Italian units in Africa, and to accept a mix of Italian and German ACIT troops so that the former could take advantage of the better anti-tank armament provided by the latter.

The requirements of personnel were examined during a meeting held on 3 October. Cavallero confirmed the approximate data provided to Mussolini: about 25,000 were to be added to the present 21,000 exempted. As for the need of reserves, there was the following forecast for 1943:

Russia	210,000 men
Northern Africa	118,000 men
Border guards	80,000 men
Forces in Italy	174,000 men
Balkans-Aegean	264,000 men
Coastal defence	67,000 men
Territorial defence	52.000 men
Anti-aircraft artillery	77,000 men
The total requirement	974,000 men

The total availability was 764,000, that is to say: 300,000 men from class 1923, just as many from class 1924, 60,000 reserves already foreseen and 104,000 already authorised recalls. In order to make up for the missing 210,000 it was thought to use the recovered, but Cavallero, though he admitted that the calculations were based on *"the experience of the previous operational cycles"*, decided that *"the total amount should decrease (...) from 974,000 to 700,000"*[10]. This way the account was balanced.

In order to make a useful comparison, see the table on the next page where the data regarding the land losses on all fronts from the beginning of war until 30 September 1942 were: 36,540 dead, 79,038 wounded, 36,831 missing and 198,444 taken prisoner.

Opinions varied about the Italian military situation, but everybody agreed on the priority and seriousness of the problem of provisions for the Italo-German forces in Egypt.

[10] Cavallero's diary, 3/10/1942.

On 7 September Cavallero met Kesselring and von Rintelen. Kesselring was a veteran from the African theatre of operations and had thought out the whole stressful matter, both due to personal diligence and the pressure from Rommel. According to objective inspections, the shortages occurred in the organisational and executive sectors were big and had to be faced with absolute determination.

In his opinion, the biggest inconvenience was the absence of an Italo-German Air-Naval Headquarters which could organise overseas transportation. The frequent changes in the departure timetables, in the routes and in the arrivals of the convoys were causing the late issuance of orders regarding air force protection and many hindrances. Moreover, the protection supplied by fighters was insufficient; the pressure on Malta, Gibraltar and the bases in the Middle East could be considered almost non-existent; Navy forces did not have the necessary equipment in terms of seekers, and the merchant ships personnel displayed unsuitable training in fire extinguishing, vessel evacuation and tugging (the recent case of the *Abruzzi,* abandoned at sea, is an example).

The first and the most important step towards bringing about a convincing total revision meant, in Kesselring's opinion, centralising the organisation into one *dictatorial* leadership with full power, in cooperation with the direction taken in Africa on all traffic between Tobruk and the front or, at least, for the coastal transportation between Tobruk and Matruh[11]. Military war legislation needed to be extended to merchant ship personnel. It was also necessary to foresee an inquiry of the military magistracy for all cases of loss. Moreover, air protection needed reinforcement; small ships, war ships escorting convoys and broad scale submarines with variable routes were to be used for supplying; air transportation was to be intensified up to 500 tons a day. In the end, keeping in mind that the bulk of supplies had to reach Africa by sea, Kesselring intended to steadily increase air transports up to 15,000 tons a month. In order to reach such an objective he would ask the OKW for a hundred more aircraft. For the record, he did not hide his anger from Cavallero about having to give 2,000 tons of his fuel *"to lousy Rommel",* who had consumed *"over 10,000 tons of fuel"* during his last advance[12].

[11] To give an idea of the management of shortcomings in Africa, a few elements will suffice. The Italian and German Navy headquarters of Tobruk and Marsa Matruh were independent, nobody coordinated the composition of convoys, their departure and arrival, and separate requests for escorts were filed to the Central Sector Headquarters of the 4th Air Force Corps. In Bengasi, there were separate Italian and German air force delegations, both of which were in charge of escorting convoys from Italy and to and from Tobruk, but no liaison was established between them and orders were sent directly by *Superaereo* and the OBS.

[12] Cavallero's diary, 7/9/1942.

A SUMMARY PROSPECT OF THE LOSSES SUFFERED OVER THE VARIOUS FRONTS (ALL THE DATA IS DRAWN FROM NOMINAL REPORTS)

Reports gathered by 30 of September 1942- XX

DETACHED	DEAD		WOUNDED		MISSING (*)	
	Officers	NCOs. Enlisted	Officers	NCOs. Enlisted	Officers	NCOs. Enlisted
ITALIAN ARMY:						
Urban territory	3	29	–	45	–	–
Western front	48	788	146	3.312	–	2
Giulio front	5	45	12	85	–	–
Northern Africa	694	7.187	857	10.335	443	12.783
Eastern Africa(1)	345	1.000	277	1.185	318	598
					32.047	
Nationals	990	13.598	1.794	34.931	25	1.266
Greek front						
Albanians	2	61	3	65	5	6
Other occupied terr.	226	2.765	254	4.520	66	1.673
Russia	192	2.544	495	10.156	94	2.201
The Aegean	6	37	5	27	8	75
M.V.S.N.:						
Urban territory	2	9	–	–	–	–
Western front	3	36	5	88	–	–
Giulio front	–	1	2	27	–	1
Northern Africa	18	286	22	282	29	596
Eastern Africa(1)	17	322	13	273	9	360
Greek front (Albanian/ Yugoslavian)	90	1.263	185	3.219	75	822
Other occupied terr.	21	449	31	609	5	48
Russia	11	177	26	712	6	196
The Aegean	–	–	–	–	–	–
	2.673	**30.597**	**4.127**	**69.871**	**1.083**	**20.448**

(*) This is the number of the missing soldiers on the various fronts including the losses caused by the sinking of steamers.

(1) One must add the following *numeric* losses, published in a communication on 10 May 1942 XIX: dead: 3,270; wounded: 5,040; missing: 15,300.

Then Kesselring brought up the issue of the neutralization of Malta and Cavallero immediately seized the opportunity:

> "I insist on a violent action of repression against Malta. Marshal Kesselring answers that he considers it as a necessary step towards an offensive and a necessary means to having total access to sea mobility. I affirm having discussed these issues many times, emphasizing their necessity. I also say there are two dangerous points: Malta and Alexandria, but to reach Alexandria one must first neutralise Malta. Marshal Kesselring informs us that tomorrow he is going to Hitler to ask him what the new forces he can count on in this matter are. He asks if he can tell the Führer about Mussolini's feelings towards Malta. I answer that if I had time (!) I would willingly write a letter"[13].

At least, as it is reported in these bare annotations, the issue does not seem to have been dealt with in an exhaustive manner. Anyway, it is clear that it was not anymore a question of solving the problem once and for all: Operation C3 was abandoned by Rome and Berlin and, by this time, a good quantity of what had once been prepared had already been absorbed by other needs. Now the issue was to "*keep Malta under pressure for two-three weeks to be free to navigate on the eastern route to Bengasi, in order to store up many good supplies*" and, in truth, it was Germany that was asked to do it. Kesselring answered that he could not do much with the two fighter squadrons left at his disposal, but he assured he would try to obtain two wings from the OKW.

Kesselring summarized his observations in a note of just a couple of pages, calling it, with some exaggeration, "Studies on the loss of fleet and on the necessary measures to improve the supply situation". *Supermarina* wanted to make some remarks about some of the contradictions and obviousness found within the document and presented Memorandum N. 92, dated 12 September. It is enough to report only its few observations about the causes:

> "(...) All the reasons listed so far are of little importance, compared to the main one, the fundamental one, the essential one, i.e. the lack of air attacks on Malta".
> The Navy has always supported the theory that this was the real solution to the matter and that all other measures were of secondary impor-

[13] *Ibid.*

tance. The facts demonstrated, and the curves of losses confirm, that the course of traffic toward Africa is strictly connected to a main element: the major or minor air capacity of Malta".

And about one of the necessary measures:

"Once the island is neutralised, not only does every problem of transportation become, as experienced before, easily solved, but also every threat of the enemy's action in the Mediterranean becomes automatically minimized"[14].

Cavallero himself noted that "*Marshal Kesselring's advice is already well known*", and in fact, besides the organizational aspects, it was the insufficiency of means which was a burden to the Italian Navy and to the Air Force. Kesselring could not ignore that available airplanes and ships were all concentrated in Sicily, the South of Italy, and Greece in favour of overseas transports. The suggestion of increasing the extent of the aircraft was just theory, considering that the Italian S.82 and German Ju.52 could carry a maximum of two tons, since they were forced to carry fuel for the trip back as well. 250 airplanes a day were needed, but such a continuous flow was not feasible.

Anyway, the Supreme Command had already been studying specific measures; one of these was a clearer and more precise codification of the matter related to naval transports, through a clarification of the legal condition of the personnel of mercantile ships and of the civilian airplanes transporting military supplies; another one was a larger quantity of naval and air supplies to the convoys. These were the dispositions meant to improve and speed up communications between the transport units and those in charge of arranging air supplies, in order to avoid the inconvenience, which had actually occurred, of allotting supplies rendered useless by the convoys not departing.

As for the strong consolidation proposed by Kesselring, Cavallero was not at all convinced of the advantage of entrusting people with running this or that organization with full powers. The dictators, he argued: "*take authority away from the Supreme Command and represent a tendency to take our place. The German part (Admiral Weichold), in agreement with the Navy, must define, on a case by case basis, which supplies*

[14] ALDO COCCHIA, *La difesa del traffico con l'Africa settentrionale dal 1° ottobre 1941 al 30 settembre 1942*, Rome, USSMM,1962, app. 17.

are necessary. Subsequently, one checks the availability of means to fulfil the order"[15]. Eventually, in September, three institutions were founded, each with precise functions in the matter of overseas supplies.

The *Escort Committee,* whose presidency was entrusted to Admiral Sansonetti, Assistant Chief of the General Staff of the Italian Navy, was supposed to eliminate the possible interferences between the Italian Navy and the Air Force, by personally deciding on the type and extent of escort for the convoys and whether or not to have convoys leave if their escorts were not assured. Moreover, the Committee was in charge of investigations and enquiries in the case of accidents and naval inefficiency.

The *Combined Air and Naval Committee,* composed of Italian and German personnel at the General Navy Staff, had to collect, evaluate and harmonise, with rapid and constant coordination, all information concerning the movement of the enemy war and merchant navies held by the Italo-German Navies and Air Forces, which even indirectly concerned the traffic of the Axis with North Africa.

The *General Special Military Logistic Headquarters for Liquid Fuel,* entrusted to General Favagrossa, who already held the post of Undersecretary of War Constructions, was the only controlling body which could muster *dictatorial* powers, as the necessity, and the convenience, for rigorous centralisation in this fundamental sector was well understood. This Logistic Headquarters was instituted mainly due to German pressure. On 1 September, Keitel announced his intention of giving away 20,000 tons of diesel oil from the *Kriegsmarine* reserves, in order to balance the yield of Romanian supplies. He specified:

> "(...) I deem it of paramount importance that the diesel supplies from Romania and through Germany be managed by the Supreme Command or at least are under its direct control.
> You will forgive me, Marshal, if I recommend that you set up an organization in Italy analogous to the one I felt it appropriate to establish in Germany, where all of the fuel supplies are under the direct control of the War Supply Office of OKW (General Thomas). Only you are able to decide if it is more advantageous for Italy to entrust the Supreme Command or General Favagrossa with such control task. Nevertheless, it seems necessary to me that, in the present situation, a free distribution of the fuel supply, without the control of the Supreme Command, is no longer possible (...)".

[15] Cavallero's diary 10/9/1942.

And Cavallero, precisely on 7 September, answered by thanking him and assuring that *"the Duce has already been considering the solution you propose for some time"* and that the General Logistic Headquarters for Liquid Fuel, entrusted to Favagrossa, was a *"a fait accompli"*.

In the afternoon of 12 September, Kesselring went back to Rome on his way from the Führer's Headquarters. Hitler, he communicated, turned out to be *"very convinced of the utmost importance of the Mediterranean and will do his best in this matter"*. Unfortunately, these were just words. The only promise to take action against Malta concerned just one fighter squadron, and only *after* the fall of Stalingrad, as it was impossible to interrupt operations in progress in that crucial section of the front. All things considered, Kesselring showed a certain confidence. The groups of the 2nd *Fliegerkorps* stationed in Sicily had 42 new aircraft at their disposal and he estimated having 80 aircraft in all. Along with the Italians, who had just as many aircraft which he believed he could engage, he intended to *"start the pressure on Malta"*, while waiting for the wing from Russia.

Fougier, however, did not hide his skepticism: the two or three groups supposed to arrive did not seem to be enough for such an exploit. And so, the entire question was submitted to the Duce. On 13 September, late in the morning, Cavallero and Kesselring showed up at *Rocca delle Caminate*. No one knows how the conversation went, but it seems that Mussolini was shown the "minutes" of what had been discussed in Rome the day before, without coming to any concrete conclusions[16].

At this point, something happened which, though not causing any aggravation to the Axis' situation, led to remarkable disorder and considerable tension. In the evening of 13 September an operation called *Big Party* by the enemy started in North Africa. Its indisputable audacity of execution can only be matched by the complexity and ingenuousness of the plan. The Commanders in Chief operating in the Middle East (except for the commanders of the 8th Army who never took part in the operation and even disapproved of it) had considered the idea of a series of *raids* for a long time, intended to disorient the Axis Headquarters and upset the far rear areas behind the Cirenaican front. The plan consisted in achieving the destruction of docks, coastal and anti-aircraft batteries, and logistic equipment on the bases of Tobruk and Bengasi through synchronised raids; neu-

[16] Brief minutes, reported by E. CANEVARI, *La guerra italiana. Retroscena di una disfatta*, Rome, Tosi, 1949, p. 608, quote three pages from Cavallero's diary on the meeting with Kesserling at 17:15 on September 12th.

tralising the railway and the plants in Barce and occupying Gialo, in order to cover the retreat of the formation designated to attack Bengasi and arrange a departure base for the incursions planned to threaten and disturb the road communications in Sirtica, between Tripolitania and Cirenaica (Sketch N. 31).

The attack on Tobruk, which in the beginning had the modest purpose of destroying the fuel supply on the spot, now aimed at a 24-hour possession of the port area, using landing troops, in order to allow naval units to enter the harbour and destroy the whole fleet, loading wharfs and docks, fuel depots, workshops and harbour installations.

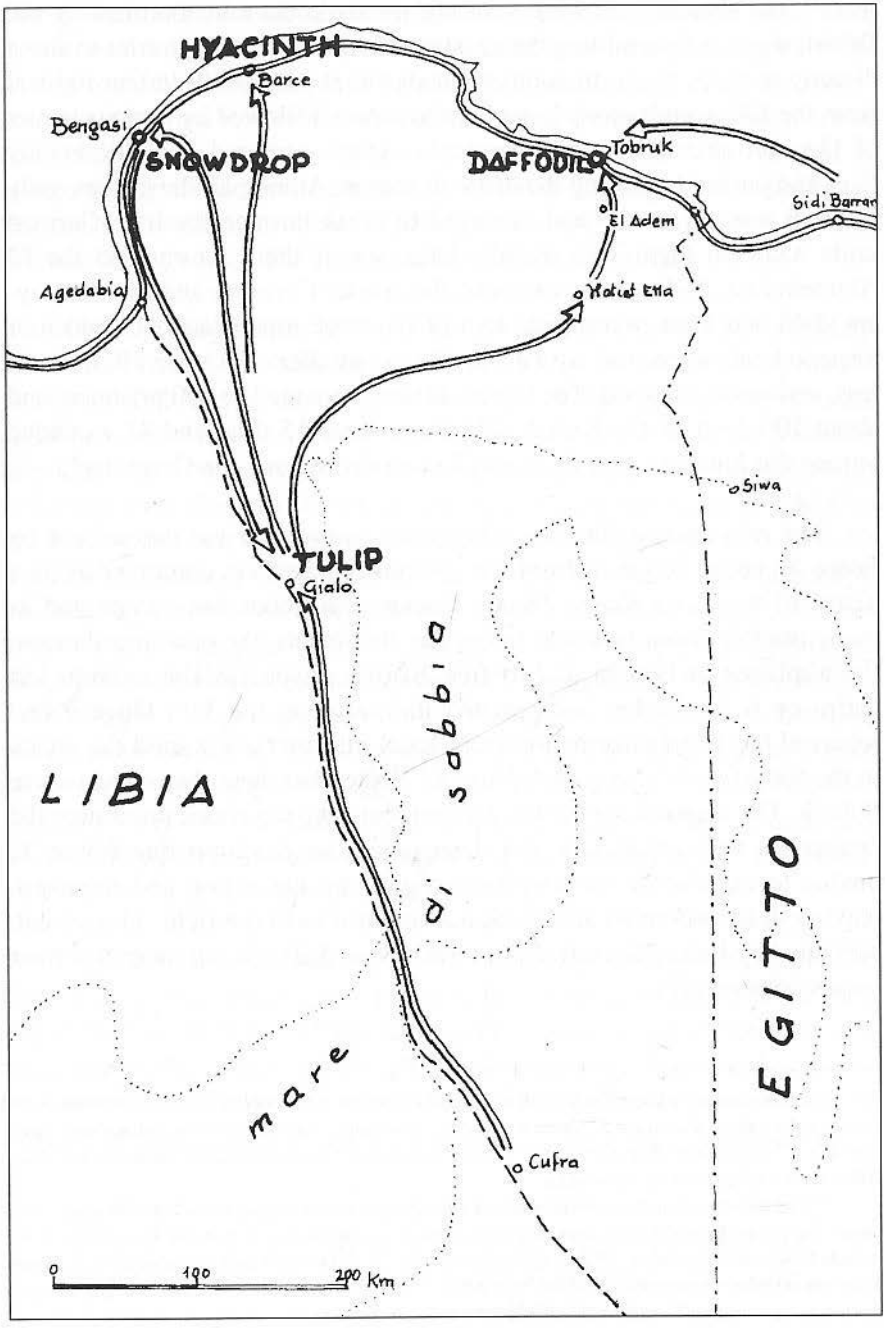
Operation *Daffodil,* as it was called, was entrusted to various corps: Force A, consisting of about 400 men from the 11th *Royal Marines* Battalion, transported by the destroyers, *Sikh* and *Zulu,* had to disembark in Marsa Auda and head to the eastern area; Force B, about 80 men from the 1st *Special Air Service* (SAS) Regiment, coming from Cufra, had to penetrate the western side of the stronghold, pretending to be prisoners escorted by Germans and occupy a little creek east of the main entrance to the port; Force C, about 100 men from the 1st *Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders* and other minor groups transported by 16 torpedo boats and 3 motor vessels coming from Alexandria, had to disembark on 14 September to reach and reinforce Force B; Force D, a naval formation made up of the anti-aircraft cruiser, *Coventry,* and 8 destroyers, after having transported Force A, had to remain off the coast until sunset of the 14th, re-embark the troops when the operation was over and escort them to Alexandria.

Another team (Force E), made up of signalmen operating on a submarine, starting from 2:45 on the 14th, had to illuminate the north entrance to the port with red lights and assist the two landings east and west. In the end, small craft were supposed to pick up any eventual missing soldiers in Marsa es-Scegga (about fifteen kilometres north of Bardia) in the night of the 19th.

The raids against Bengasi and Barce were assigned to the *Special Air Service* and the *Long Range Desert Group* respectively.

A violent air bombing of the Tobruk port gave Force B the signal to start at 21:30 on the 13th. The beginning seemed promising for the attacking soldiers, as they managed to set up a bridgehead beyond the floating barrier on the southern side of the port and give the green light to the other *commandos*. But then everything went wrong. Force C failed completely: only ten men managed to land and it had to come back to Alexandria after having lost 5 small boats. Force A managed to land 150 men a few kilo-

Sketch N. 31
"BRITISH RAIDS IN CIRENAICA IN MID-SEPTEMBER"



metres far from the planned entry point at about 4 o'clock in the morning, when the alarm in Tobruk became general and the defence was about to react[17], the searchlights were splitting the darkness and illuminating the British ships and permitting the coastguard and anti-craft batteries to shoot directly towards them. In addition, at dawn, about twenty Italian fighters from the 13th assault group joined in the action, followed by various waves of German aircraft shortly afterwards, which ventured over the enemy fleet and pursued it during the difficult retreat. Among all the groups, only Force B was successful and managed to break through the Italo-German units with ten men. Two months later, six of them returned to the El Alamein line. As for the naval units, the cruiser *Coventry* and two destroyers, *Sikh* and *Zulu,* were sunk; two of the three motor launches and four torpedo boats were sunk as well, while the smaller craft were all, more or less, seriously damaged. The human losses amounted to 600 prisoners and about 100 dead on the British side; there were 15 dead and 43 wounded among the Italians and 1 dead and 7 wounded among the Germans[18].

The raid against Bengasi (Operation *Snowdrop*) was carried out by Force X, about 200 men from the *Special Air Service*, commanded by a patrol of the *Long Range Desert Group* with about forty jeeps and as many trucks, whose task was to destroy the depots, the port installations, the airplanes in Benina and to free British prisoners. The column left Cufra on 6 September and reached the *gebel* on the 11th. Once it had received the latest information from local informers, it started the attack in the suburbs of the city at 4:00 on 14 September, near the crossroads to Soluch. The response of the Italian unit manning the check point near the crossroads was immediate and determined, so much so that Force X, unable to exploit the surprise factor, gave up the action and retreated, leaving dead, wounded and some burning trucks in the field. The retreat, burdened by Italian aircraft at their heels, was difficult and increased their losses considerably.

[17] The forces available in the Tobruk Sector Headquarters at the beginning of the incursion were as follows: 1 battalion from the *S. Marco* Regiment, 1 formation company from the Italian Navy, units from the 18th *Carabinieri* Battalion and 5th Libyan Battalion, 2 German formation battalions (of about 700 men in total), and some navy units.

[18] The Italo-German losses were suffered entirely by the sector's garrison. Once the alarm was raised, the troops transported by cars flew from Derna, Ain el-Gazala, Bardia and Ben Amud. They included: two battalions of the 7th *Bersaglieri*, one of the 35th Infantry *Pistoia*, the armoured car group *Monferrato,* minor detachments and German units. Such units, moreover, were not engaged because the forces operating in Tobruk were sufficient to defeat the attackers.

Almost at the same time, two *Long Range Desert Group* patrols, coming from El Fayum, were implementing Operation *Hyacinth* against Barce. One of them hurled itself against a check point on the southern *gebel* road at 1:30 on 14 September, overturning it, and entered the city with its vehicles in route columns and with lights turned on, firing in every direction. Another one went toward the airport, the main objective, arriving there at full speed, and managed to burn 16 planes and damage 7. It was able to escape before the defence, which was engaged in parrying the attacks on the most vulnerable perimeter objectives far from the main entrance, that is from Barce, could efficiently react to the surprise attack.

All the raiding parties had to pass between the oasis of Gialo, held by Italian forces, and the huge sea of sand of Kalansho, in order to proceed northwards. However, the columns in charge of the *raid* against Bengasi and Barce were forced to come back along the same way. Now, if on the one hand they could count on surprise and on help from the dazzling reflection over the horizon on the journey out, on the other it could be much more difficult to pass by unobserved on the way back. And so, on 15 September, Force Z, made up of the *Sudan Defence Force*, had to occupy the oasis to let other units retreat safely, and stay in the area for another three weeks, raiding in different directions (Operation *Tulip*). Force Z, about 200 men with a field battery and a 20-pounder one from war spoils, left Cufra on 11 September and in the evening of 15th got a few hundred metres from the Italian fort. The night attack developed quite confusedly and at dawn the attackers were pushed out to the western extremity of the oasis; however, from then on, a total blockade of the garrison started, also because they had the artilleries at their disposal, despite there being some intervention by small Italian Air Force formations.

There was no doubt that the British raids were a complete failure on the practical level, with serious losses of personnel and materials, but they had at least a great psychological impact. A widespread concern for the areas behind the front had been gnawing at Rommel, Barbasetti and particularly Bastico for a long time. The latter had already pointed out the urgency of concretising measures for the defence of the Libyan Sahara:

> "(...) However, in regards to the measures under discussion, - for which I allow myself to renew my requests for urgent implementation - they can only represent a first step in the reinforcement of the Libyan Sahara, which appears more necessary and urgent day after day.

In fact, considering the situation on the Egyptian front, which has been developing due to recent events, it should not be excluded that there may be a simultaneous attack from east and south in the autumn or, possibly, in the last days of this month or in the first days of October; this would preclude any even modest possibility of moving the forces and materiel from the Egyptian to the Saharan front (...).
Speed is equally essential, as I proposed, to introducing the announced armoured motor unit.
But all of this, in my opinion, would not be sufficient to assure an even partial resistance against the actions of the enemy, who - as it turns out from the latest and ever more frequent indications - seems to have an action on the Libyan Sahara in mind.
I will, therefore, submit the results of a study to you in the next few days that is now underway and which will show us the minimum number of units and measures required (...)"[19].

Taking this into account, the massive enemy attack caused real alarm, especially considering the possibility of a reiteration of the raids combined with the planned offensive of the 8th Army.

The repercussions in Rome were immediate. Cavallero was beginning to realise that the new organization of leadership in Africa, that he wanted, had some flaws. On 7 September he met with Major Melchiorri, head of the Propaganda Office of *Superlibia*, who not only indicated various local problems but, as soon as he was back in Libya, insisted on it with a personal letter: "*Dear Cavallero, I think it would be great if you could come here. There are many things causing friction between the two Italian Commands* (Superlibia *and* Delease). *Everybody thinks that your visit would help a lot (...)*"[20].

If, as it was plausible, Cavallero intended to go on site to personally check how things were really going, the last operational news convinced him completely. One must add that, although on the 14th Kesselring "*informs that he does not consider an enemy attack in A.S.I. probable. He trusts in our possibilities for defence and counterattack. He will, nevertheless, file a private report to me*"[21], Cavallero had an opposite opinion,

[19] DSCS f.01/17036/Op. dated 7/9/1942 of *Superlibia*.

[20] Cavallero's diary, 21/9/1942. Major Melchiorri's letter is dated September 13th. It is to be observed that on 7 September, the day of Melchiorri's visit, Cavallero ordered that, from 15th on, General Barbasetti abandoned the post of the General Staff of *Superlibia*, temporarily preserved by accepting the appointment as the *Delease* commander (DSCS, tele 32317/Op. dated 7/9/1942).

[21] Cavallero's diary, 14/9/1942.

so much so that he considered the possibility of a British disembarking in Tobruk as *"a sign of enemy action on El Alamein"* and decided to talk about it to Mussolini on the phone.

At 20:30 on the 16th, he ordered to make an appointment with Bastico for the following day at the Derna airport. He spent his time examining the complex Libyan situation and unblocking the Gialo garrison on the 17th and 18th, whose difficulties seemed to be increasing. Then he personally experienced the impotence of *Superlibia*. In order to mount a strong action to help the oasis, it was necessary for Barbasetti to lend some units to Bastico. After laborious preparations, at 12:00 on the 19th, the column entrusted to General D'Antoni left Agedabia, where it had been stationed[22]. Soon, the march became slow and difficult due to bad road conditions and high temperatures, and about 30 vehicles got stranded. Finally, at 3:00 on the 21st, the vanguard got near Gialo and in the late morning the entire column came into the oasis. Force X, called back from Cairo, had taken off as of the 19th.

There was no doubt about the necessity for improving protection of the Libyan territory and Cavallero immediately ordered a partial modification of the present organisation: *Delease* took over the Tobruk sector and the troops stationed there. The Italian-German Armoured Army (ACIT), the new denomination for the AIT (Italian German Army), had full responsibility over the whole area beyond the border. Following these changes, Bastico issued specific directives to the Headquarters of the Libyan Sahara (General Mannerini) to assure the defence of Fezzan against troops coming from south, reportedly from Tibesti, and from south-east, particularly from the Cufra oasis.

As it turned out from the intelligence service, there were ten battalions of enemy forces to hold at bay. So, they settled three strips of defence west of the Libyan desert and Gialo. One advanced strip in charge of vigilance, delaying and wearing down from el-Gatrun to Bir Zelten; an intermediate strip of strenuous resistance from Gat, on the border with Algeria, in Marada, Sirtica; a rear strip for assembly from Ubar to Hon, which would bear the resistance in case the Gat-Murzuch-Zelle-Marada line was broken (Sketch N. 32). We will see how the outline of serious events on the El Alamein front and the political and military transformations in French North Africa forced new changes.

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[22] The D'Antoni column had the following formation, chosen among the ones that had been put on alert for the incursion against Tobruk: 35th Inf. *Pistoia*, over two battalions, the LVII *Bersaglieri* Battalion, the *Monferrato* armoured car battalion and one 75/27 group of two batteries.

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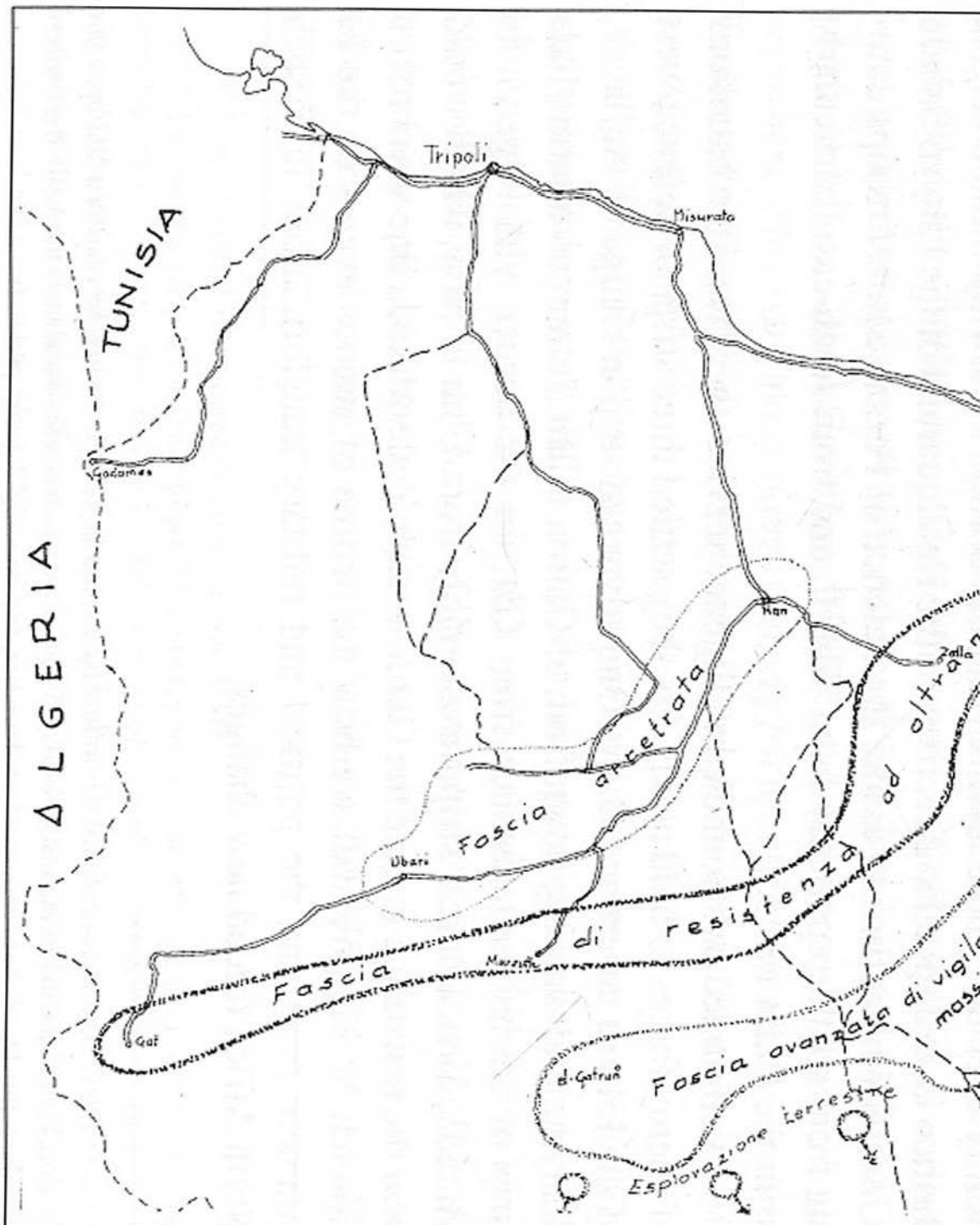

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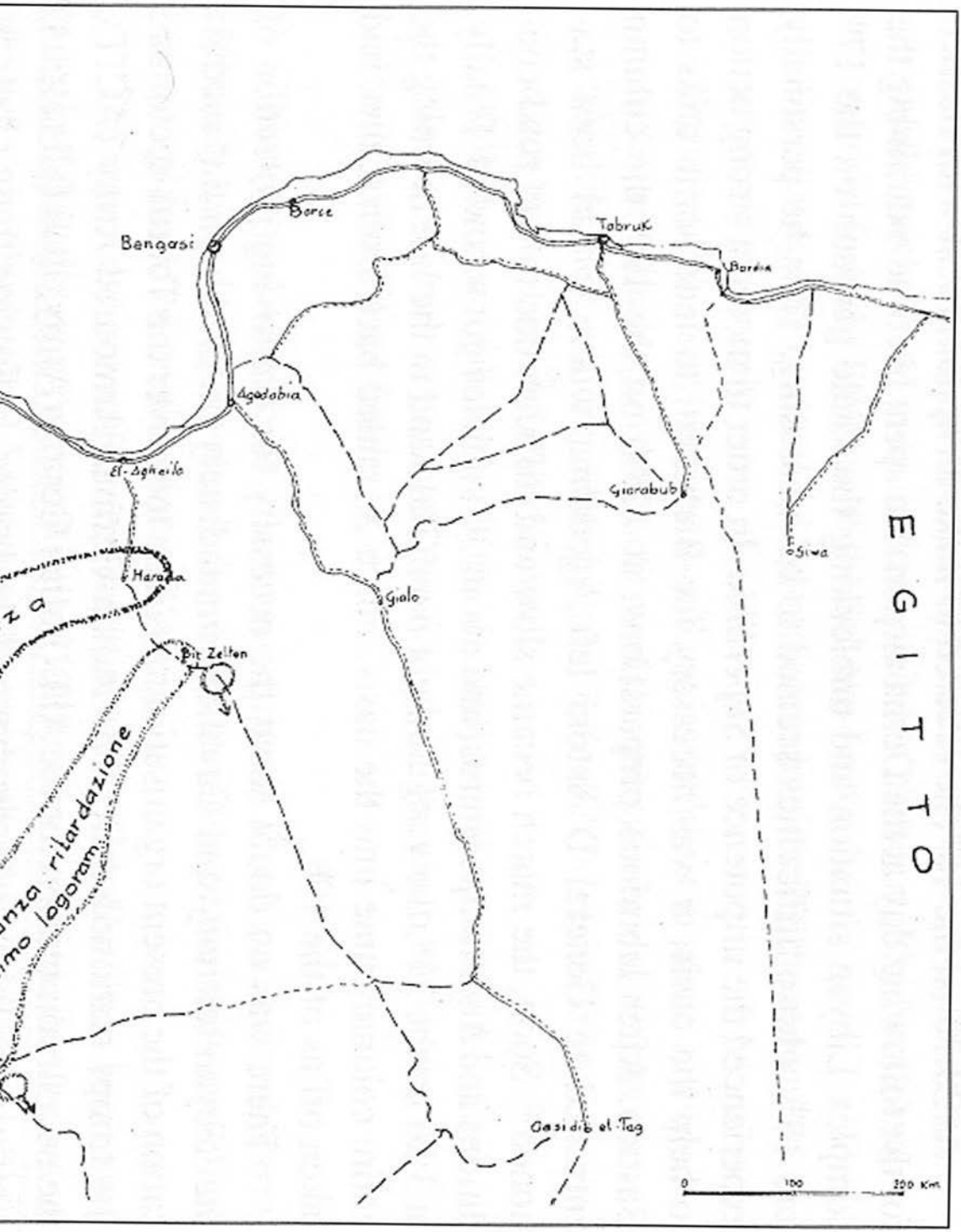

After Cirenaica, Cavallero decided to meet ACIT. In the morning of the 19th, he reached Fuka, where he went on to Rommel's headquarters. The meeting dealt with the security of the rear areas[23], the deployment and the necessities of ACIT, and the defence of the Egyptian coast. It did not last long as Rommel was about to depart for Europe and the whole meeting basically translated into some requests: field artillery for the *Folgore*, groups of 150, reserves, major supplies, the installation of defence lines just behind the front and fixing the railway from Tobruk to El Alamein.

We do not know how the commander of ACIT presented the operational situation. We do have, however, a personal letter from Kesselring to Cavallero, written on the 17th, so just few days before, where Kesselring reports the conversation he had had with Rommel during his short stay in Africa:

> "(...) Rommel forecasts an enemy attack within the next 14 days.
> Military reasons.
> Rommel maintains that the enemy is strong enough to attack and reckons it will be an infantry attack, which will be backed up by tanks later on (...). On the basis of the situation, Rommel believes it will be an attack coming from the northern wing of the enemy (...).
> 2. Political reasons.
> Churchill must do something for Russia: either he sends considerable reinforcements to Caucas, weakening the Egyptian front so that he will be forced to abandon it, or he will carry out an attack, whatever the cost, at a much later time.
> ...
> 6. My opinion.
> If the enemy attacks now, before more reinforcements reach him, it will only be for political reasons. From a military perspective, a premature attack of the enemy is favourable (...)".

Cavallero, whose departure from Rome coincided with the return of Kesselring to Italy, only read this letter when he himself came back. In the

[23] A clear sign of how much Rommel worried about the vulnerability of the lines of communication, and of how incisive his action of command was, is represented by the fact that, on September 15th, the day after the *raids*, he flew to Tobruk to congratulate Admiral Lombardi and General Deindl on the efficacy of the response and to exhort them not to decrease the surveillance. Obviously, the enormous importance of Tobruk had also been recognized by Kesselring and Barbasetti, who had rushed there to get acquainted with the facts. Moreover, Rommel flew to Siwa on the 21st in order to inspect the garrison and be seen by the Arabs of the oasis.

meantime, General Magli thought it would be advisable to submit the letter to Mussolini, but the latter did not make any important comment on it.

On 22 September Rommel met with the corps and division commanders. He first thought it right to spend a few words on the disappointing results of the Alam el Halfa battle. There is no need to review these argumentations as they are generally well-known. Then he went on to predicting an eventual offensive attack by the 8th Army, but he simply said a few words about it, as a mere assumption, in relation to the recent raids in Cirenaica:

> "(...) If the enemy should attack, he will attack in a new way; not just between the sea and the El Qattara Depression, but in depth, farther beyond the Egyptian border. The last raids from Cufra to Barce, up to the gates of Tobruk and near Bengasi, should only be considered as an experiment. The attempt will probably be repeated with greater means in order to resolve the situation (...).
> The new formation has drawn mobile forces from the front, placing them behind the units on the first strip (...). One must bear in mind that the two army corps had probably been kept in defence of the front without being able to count on the support of fast and armoured troops. I am not worrying about the possibility of resistance of those forces (...).
> The unit organization, which will be modified within a few weeks, will put our worries to rest about a massive attack either (...)"[24].

Rommel did not show his true thoughts, according to his diary: a strong skepticism toward the future of ACIT and Libya, determined by the awareness that there was no way to hinder the total domination of the enemy. It is not easy to identify Rommel's state of mind. He believed that, since they were facing the indisputable superiority of RAF, there would be no solution to the operational problems of ACIT and, moreover, he had no illusions about the possibility of balancing the forces between the opposing aviations. Nevertheless, he did not show the discouragement that he had harboured since the crisis in mid-July. His nightmares about supplies were so big that on 9th September, when Mellenthin was about to repatriate, he delivered him a personal memorandum addressed to General Halder, Chief of OKH. The memo finished with these words:

> "If the army is not supplied with absolutely necessary materials, it will not be able to resist the united forces of the British Empire and the USA,

[24] *Delease* historical diary, f. 2656/sit, 22/9/1942.

that is, two world powers. Notwithstanding its courage, the army will sooner or later suffer the fate of the Halfaya garrison"[25].

However, in the meantime, it seems he did not consider the alternative of retreating in order to shorten the arm of land transports at all. In Mancinelli's opinion, perhaps in that period Rommel believed he would be able to wait for Montgomery and block him in the Strait of El Alamein, as if, since the battle of Alam el Halfa, he had been convinced of a very strong inherent solidity of those positions. He even accepted a concept of static defence, which was alien to his character.

It is worth citing an incident concerning this stance. Bastico, when he had found out that Rommel was leaving Africa, wanted to say goodbye to him. He found Rommel tired but not disheartened: "*The failure was serious*", Rommel admitted with bitterness, "*but I am not finished. I still have a ray of hope and, if things go as I hope they do, the situation may reverse*". Then his expression changed, he clenched his fist and continued: "*If they send me what I asked for and if in Germany and Rome they assure me suitable reinforcements, I am sure that my men will be able to teach Montgomery a hard lesson*". Bastico changed the subject not to discourage him too much[26].

When, at the end of the meeting, Rommel formally communicated his departure, there was a general sensation of discomfort and awkwardness. Although his physical tiredness was visible[27], no one was convinced he really wanted to take a period of rest. Nobody believed he would spontaneously leave the army on the eve of the British offensive! Probably - it was thought- the measure was due to the well known friction with Kesselring and was being left undetermined, at least for the moment, in order to leave space in case some solution was suggested or imposed by events of the war. On the other hand, Rommel did not care much about dissolving the uncertainties, perhaps because he himself was uncertain about

[25] F. VON MELLENTHIN, *op. cit.*, p. 177.

[26] Bastico commented: "*I realized that my action deeply impressed the German marshal and, in fact, when in January 1943 I definitely left Africa, 4 days before I caught the airplane which was to bring me back to Italy, Rommel left his headquarters and came to see me at Sfax to shake my hand" (Weekly publication,* Tempo, *n. 51 of 16/12/1958, "Marshal Bastico answers Montgomery").*

[27] Gen. De Stefanis, present at the meeting, made an annotation in the historical diary of XX Corps: "*the Marshal has left, in order to confer with the Duce and the Führer and rest for a few weeks*". Rommel's departure was known to all the important levels in Africa and planned initially between 15 and 20 Sept. It was then postponed due to the British raids and for the presumed duration of the absence, i.e. not less than a month's time. For obvious reasons, the news was hidden, and so only a few people in ACIT knew about it.

his future and how long his convalescence would last. Besides, he had confided to General Stumme, who had arrived from Europe on the 19th to replace him, that, in the event of a big offensive by the 8th Army, he would be prepared to interrupt his leave and return to Egypt immediately. It is probable that Stumme was not too flattered by such an implicit indication of distrust, but the difference in specific experience and ascendancy over the troops between the two commanders was undeniable.

On investigating Rommel's decision to go back to Germany, one may believe that in the beginning he had a real intention of leaving Africa and ACIT definitively, otherwise he would not have insisted on his replacement with Guderian. Subsequently, when he came to know that Kesselring would be chosen and that, very likely, he would be sent to Egypt again, he changed his mind and stance.

The replacement of Rommel with Stumme leads us to think that Hitler did not want to change his victorious captain, who demonstrated making things work out even when left on his own, but he simply wanted to give him some deserved rest. Stumme was an excellent protagonist in the armoured war in Russia but he had recently stumbled into a serious misadventure as a commander of the XL Armoured Corps. On 20 June, an officer of the General Staff of the 23rd *Panzerdivision,* who had gone to the front line with his airplane, was shot down and captured with all the orders of the XL Army Corps related to the imminent offensive. Stumme was blamed for having used written communications not only to instruct detailed orders to his division commanders but to have likewise communicated the tasks assigned to the adjacent 4th Army. He was relieved from command on 27 June, together with his Chief of Staff and the commanding officer of the 23rd *Panzerdivision*, and court-martialled by Goering and General von Thoma (who was now about to take the command of the DAK). He escaped the death punishment and demotion thanks to the intervention of Marshal von Bock, commander of the army group. Stumme was then condemned to the maximum of penalty for disobedience and negligence, i.e. 5 years of military prison. Moreover, Hitler, by explicit request of the court, pardoned him for his brilliant career as a general. The incident had happened in August and it was hard to think that a month later Hitler would entrust *Panzerarmee Afrika* to Stumme, if it were not for a short time.

On 23 September Rommel was in Rome. He showed up at the Supreme Command to continue the conversation he had started in Egypt. There were, essentially, two main issues. The first concerned the requirements to supply ACIT: about 120,000 tons a month of materials were needed for land and air forces compared with the maximum of 80,000 tons

implemented so far, also considering that, disembarking in Tripoli, 20% of fuel was consumed during the transport to the front. The second point concerned personnel: 30,000 had to be replaced, including 12,000 sick; if they could not find any way to repatriate them (and replace them), they would run the risk of a breakdown in morale among the troops, which Rommel refused to take responsibility for.

There were also particular questions that would later be cited by Rommel with contempt, in order to demonstrate that one could not count much on Italian promises: *Delease* was supposed to provide 3,000 men for the building of a communications line behind the front, but Barbasetti had only granted 400, only a hundred of whom actually worked on the road which, consequently, would never be completed. Italy was supposed to send 7,000 tons of rails and ties to build the railway from Tobruk to El Alamein, but they were never sent and the only workmen employed there were those from the 90th Light Division. There should have been an expedition to Cufra to eliminate the enemy base stationed at the oasis, but neither Cavallero nor Barbasetti had given the go-ahead for the project[28].

It is, therefore, interesting to see the relevant documentation. On 27 September ACIT reported a synthesis of the agreements between Rommel and Cavallero to *Delease,* which was received by Rommel through von Rintelen: *Delease* was to immediately make 3,000 men available for the front track; there would be 7,000 tons of rails and ties sent by Italy as "*additional cargo to that established for the convoys*". Giarabub passed immediately to ACIT's dependence. *Superlibia* was responsible for the security against Cufra and would launch a column against said oasis[29]. Barbasetti went to the Supreme Command to clear up the points that regarded him directly:

> "On 12 September Marshal Rommel already addressed the issue of the front track. He then repeated it a second time asking me (over the 4,000 qualified men necessary for the project carried out by our Engineer Headquarters) for 1,400 workmen, of whom 400 specialised, and 300

[28] It must be observed that the Italian version of Rommel's Memoirs does not correspond to the English one exactly. In *Guerra senza odio,* Garzanti, 1959, it is written: "The *Italians wanted to send 3,000 soldiers to Libya immediately...", "I was assured that Italy would send 7,000 tons of rails and ties to Africa...", "The Italians wanted to occupy the oasis of Cufra" (pp. 246-247).* In *The Rommel Papers, cited,* sentences are different: "*The Italians in Libya would immediately set 3,000 men to work...", "The Italians agree to send 7,000 tons by sea...", "The Italians pledged to attack and capture Cufra.." (p. 293).*

[29] *Delease* historical diary, f. 2282/Secr., ACIT, 27/9/1942.

trucks. I repeated for the second time that I was only able to supply a maximum of 400 workmen (i.e. the specialised ones), by suspending less urgent works, such as the aqueducts and the Sidi Barrani road requested by Rommel, and I asked for a German contribution, as we are also indirectly working on the front railway (...).

In conclusion, there are not 3,000 workers in all of *Delease* (...). Engineer Headquarters (...) has about 800 men in place (...). The effort made by *Delease* was to make 400 specialised workmen available (...)".

All things considered, continued Barbasetti, the engineer and worker units were all very busy in other indispensable tasks, and from the 60,000 *Delease* men, including Navy and Air Forces (not 80,000 as required by ACIT), it was literally impossible to supply another 3,000 men as requested, independently of whether it was possible to find 300 trucks or not. As for the railway, the time schedule made by the Germans was too optimistic, and it still had to be seen when the materials would arrive. Finally, Giarabub, had already been on the dependence of ACIT for some time, together with Siwa with which it made a sector[30].

But that was not all. On 30 September Barbasetti had a long conversation with Stumme, about many detailed questions, such as the famous railroad. The German officer reported that "*Rome was asked for 3,000 men instead of 1,000 by mistake*" and Barbasetti convinced him that, except for the 400 qualified workers, he would only be able to satisfy his request by drawing from the reserves, which even Stumme ruled out. Moreover, the ACIT operations office remarked that, in fact, Giarabub was already under the army's jurisdiction[31].

When called on by Barbasetti, Cavallero specified from his corner that the famous 3,000 men asked for by Rommel had not been guaranteed at all and the railway materials had not been granted either; furthermore, nobody could object to the fact that the required materials could in no way be sent "*in addition to what the convoys were already carrying*". As for Cufra, the conversation had taken a specific line of action into consideration, but without any conclusive intentions and, besides, the means were insufficient to plan such an enterprise anyway[32].

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[30] *Delease* historical diary, f. 2869/Sit., 29/9/1942.

[31] *Ibid.*, f. 2919/Sit, 30/9/1942.

[32] DSCS, F. 33100/Op., 20/10/1942. Even in Cavallero's diary there is no sign of any agreement, only Rommel requests, and generic answers by Cavallero.

Rommel engaged Cavallero in a conversation on other issues. It was important to him because it was linked to a solution, quite unorthodox, found for the defensive problems of the army. The crucial point was the "*miserable*" armament of the Italian divisions, so inferior to the German that, to achieve the same density of fire all over the front, it was necessary to merge Axis units. It had already been done before, although within well-defined limits, but it was now to be introduced on a larger scale and extended to the large reserve units. "*Every two divisions, one Italian and one German, there are three independent combat groups. In short, Germans and Italians are mixed together*", wrote Cavallero[33].

What transpired during the conversation is not exactly clear, but Mancinelli filed an exhaustive report on 14 September. The Axis battalions alternated on the line of resistance, keeping the hierarchical boundaries with the regiments unaltered, just like between regiments and divisions. The result was a comb-shaped co-penetration of the Italian and German sectors, where the relations among adjoining battalions were of pure "collaboration". The system tended to play on the spirit of emulation, on the exploitation of all arms and artillery fire to everyone's benefit, without damaging the organic ties. Moreover, the concept of responsibility for the defence of the superior sectors remained appreciably confused. As for the reserves, it was a different matter, since it appeared impossible to realize this level of intermingling. So, all that Rommel could do was place divisions side by side: *Ariete* and 21st *Panzer*, *Littorio* and 15th *Panzer*, *Trieste* and 90th Light. The single divisions would receive the orders through their own corps headquarters. It is important to point out that such a direction seemed a little bit vague within the practical implications of fighting. Anyway,

> "Above all, Rommel intends, in this way, to obtain", continued Mancinelli, "greater agility and speed of movement from our big armoured and motorized units, considerably slower than the German ones.
> Marshal Rommel feels that this inferior level of performance is not caused by the different characteristics of the materials, but above all by a certain tendency to schematize and also an inferior ability to face the unexpected, due to having less suitable weaponry available (long range artilleries, self-propelled or towed anti-tank weapons)..."[34].

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[33] Cavallero's diary, 23/9/1942.

[34] It is useful to point out that there had already been Italian approval to such a measure. The *Delease* historical diary, on the 12th, reads: *"the Duce agrees to the proposal of AIT Headquarters (...) to intermingle the Italian and German units up to battalion level"*.

We will return to this issue, which deserves special attention, because Cavallero asked ACIT for an explanation about the attribution of responsibility. For the time being, the head of General Staff did not want to argue and accepted Rommel's explanation, that is to say, that the measure taken would allow a better resistance to a violent British attack on the central area of the front. If the enemy attacked, he would find a deep minefield first, and then a well articulated display of forces, which would stop him, while counterattacks would be launched from north and south. There was still the *Trieste* and the 90th Light as back up, designated to rush toward Siwa to counter possible enemy assaults, among other things.

The day after it was Mussolini's turn. Cavallero and Rommel were invited to *Rocca delle Caminate* and the latter repeated more or less what he had already proposed in Rome. "*I made it clear*", he wrote later, "*that if the supplies were not sent at least in the quantity I indicated, we would be forced to leave North Africa*". He expressed his incredulity of a British initiative and, anyway, if it happened, he guaranteed the possibility of halting it, employing a manoeuvred defence with counterattacks on limited objectives (that is to say, not up to Alexandria). To resume the offensive attack, on the other hand, another two divisions, one German and one Italian, and fuel for thirty days would be needed[36]. The inconsistency between the operational forecasts made by Rommel to Cavallero on the 23rd and to Mussolini on the 24th is really strange and there is no convincing explanation, if not that perhaps Rommel's ideas were not interpreted or synthesized correctly, that is to say, that he did not believe in *a short term* offensive of the 8th Army. But such a hypothesis is not consistent with what Rommel had said to Kesselring in Tobruk a few days before or with the intention, manifested to Stumme, to return immediately if Montgomery decided to move.

Rommel surely went back to Germany full of disappointment, even if this does not match what is in Cavallero's diary. In his notes there is a sharp criticism of poor commitment by Italy. He wrote about Mussolini: "*I believe that, despite what I told him, he has not fully realised the gravity of the situation yet*". He relied even less on Cavallero's promises and emphasized them with bitter irony: "*Perhaps*", he wrote, "*he simply wanted to calm me down and thought that some time would pass before I moved back into action in Africa*"[37]. He made veiled recurring comments about

[35] B. Liddell Hart, *The Rommel Papers, cit.*, p. 293.

[36] Cavallero's diary, summary of the conversation between Cavallero and Col. Otzen, German military attaché in Rome, 25/9/1942.

[37] B. Liddell Hart, *op. cit.*, p. 293.

everybody: *"You will make it anyway!"* It is true that, while in Italy everyone was shrugging their shoulders trustingly, the general thought was even more depressing in Germany: *"We will win because we must win!"*[38].

In fact, if the optimism in Rome was vague, in Berlin it could be called enthusiastic, also because the breakthrough and victory in the Middle East would surely affect the current operations in the southern sector of the Russian front. Rommel was welcomed with honours and received the Field Marshal's baton from Hitler. He was received with sympathy and understanding when he illustrated the causes for failure in the battle of Alam el Halfa and when he described the defensive organization of ACIT. When he came to the point, once again he expressed without circumlocution:

> "I realize", he said, "that, considering the current naval and maritime strategic situation in the Mediterranean, a big effort must be made in order to assure the continuity of the flow of German provisions to Africa. A maximum effort of all the German and Italian transports is thus required and it involves the strengthening of convoy escorts. Only in these conditions can I declare that the German troops, which carry the most weight of the battle in Africa, will be able to preserve this theatre of operations against the best units of British Empire"[39].

Goering sufficiently minimized the ACIT's problems and when Rommel stated that German tanks were put out of combat due to 40 mm armour piercing rounds fired by American fighter-bombers, he was touched on a sore spot and answered disdainfully: *"It is absolutely impossible. The Americans only know how to produce razor blades!"* To which Rommel, showing the sample of a grenade he had brought with him, answered: *"We would like to have some of these razor blades, too!"* Hitler, on the other hand, was attentive and concrete; he promised the imminent use of a great number of *Siebelfahren*, the special rafts whose use led to hope for the elimination of most of the difficulties related to the overseas supplying. He then promised to send a brigade equipped with 500 *Nebelwerfer*, multiple rocket launchers, forty *Tiger* tanks and many self-

[38] *Ibid.*, p. 294.

[39] H.G. VON ESEBECK, *op. cit.*, p. 133. On the other side, not even Rommel was left aside, because on October 3rd, in a press conference with the Axis and foreign journalists, he foresaw the entrance to Alexandria. Later on, he justified himself by saying that he was trying to delay the British offensive with such optimistic statements (E. ROMMEL, *op. cit.*, p. 250).

propelled guns to Egypt. But when the obstacles are real and solid, the best intentions are not always carried out. Consequently, also Hitler's and the OKW's promises, just like Cavallero's and the Supreme Command's, remained unrealized for the purposes of the El Alamein battle.

At the same time, another big problem had drawn the full attention of the Supreme Command. It was logical to predict that the 8th Army offensive would be aided by an extension of the operations in the central Mediterranean, at least by drawing Axis forces there. Cavallero thus decided to detach a naval formation to the Aegean. It was a measure already considered before, and specially requested by Kesselring, who was convinced that it would be advantageous to act in the eastern basin of the Mediterranean with naval forces, harbouring them in Rhodes and Scarpanto, appropriately equipped like bases, and to reserve the western basin for airplanes. A double result was hoped for: contribute to assuring our routes to Africa indirectly by acting on the British convoys going from Alexandria to Malta and, in the meantime, oppose the possible landing of the enemy in the eastern sector.

Any sea initiative was tied to the availability of diesel oil, at that point beyond our control. Therefore, Cavallero entrusted Marras with the responsibility of illustrating the disastrous Italian drama to the ally once again. The supplies from Romania were seriously lacking: instead of 19,000 tons of diesel forecast for September, only 10,000 could be counted on; similarly, of the 50,000 tons of combustible oil planned, there was only hope of receiving 38,000. Given the recent losses, the availability would reach zero by the end of the month. To sum up, the reported lack had to be filled and the transport times reduced. It is also true that Keitel had explained himself in a very comprehensive way in the letter mentioned from 1 September. Taking advantage of von Rintelen's trip to Berlin, he examined the Italian diesel situation with him. The German minister for supplies was leaving for Romania to better understand the reasons for decreased production. However, he hoped anyway to be able to give away 10,000 tons of the *Kriegsmarine*'s reserves in September, which was not engaged in the North Sea at that moment. But Cavallero wanted to remove any doubts: *"The gravity of the situation"*, he wrote, *"must be considered in the true operational framework, which imposes to urgently supply the troops operating in Egypt and assure minimal resistance to Tripolitania and Cirenaica"*[41].

[40] E. ROMMEL, *op. cit.*, p. 249

[41] DSCS, tele 5564/Tr, 17/9/1942, 11:25.

Marras was formally assured but, in practice, the result was so disappointing that he decided to send to Cavallero a new distressing telegram:

> "The situation with diesel oil, combustible oil and fuel in general requires immediate measures be taken to face the situation and provide supplies to Egypt and Libya. Until this 21 September, 39,000 tons, not the 90,000 tons agreed, have left Romania.
> Therefore, beginning the 22nd until the end of the month, 54,000 tons, i.e. 6,500 tons a day on average, equivalent to 15 trains, should depart from Romania, and this is practically impossible. So the quantities guaranteed cannot be fulfilled. A new intervention by Germany is needed to obtain direct provisions of diesel oil and combustible oil. I have to report that the results have been negative up to now where the intervention of the Chief of the German transport agency is concerned, because yesterday only one train left Romania instead of two, and tomorrow only two will leave instead of four.
> It seems that the above situation depends on the lack of locomotives and not on the lack of product.
> I, therefore, implore you to intervene once again and inform me of the results which must absolutely be achieved"[42].

At the same time, Cavallero went to Keitel personally, taking advantage of Rommel's visit and of the conversation he had had with him and with Kesselring, and informed him about the predicted detachment of Italian Navy units into the Aegean.

The plan had various advantages on the operational level but, to be carried out, it required the presence of a certain quantity of diesel in the Aegean to assure the possibility of supplying the Italian naval formation in place.

> "It is a matter;" he continued, "of about 20,000 tons which should be stored in Piraeus and Suda on behalf of German authorities, and should be available in case of operational necessity.
> As Field Marshal Rommel is going to illustrate, such a precaution would also intensify the pace of transports towards Africa, which is a necessary measure considering the current situation and our expectations for the future (...)"[43].

Overseas transports were undergoing ferocious losses. From 2 to 23 September, the date of Keitel's letter, 6 steamers and one tanker had been

[42] DSCS, tele 5653/Tr., 22/9/1942, 19:10.
[43] DSCS, letter dated 23/9/1942.

sunk. Another ship had been sunk the last week of the same month: the sad final balance was 97,000 tons of the provisions sent by Italy versus the 77,000 that arrived in Libya, equal to a 20% loss. The worst thing was that the most relevant damage regarded fuel: of the 40,200 tons of fuel sent, only 31,061 had reached the destination, a 22.74% loss.

The drama continued and in October it became the unavoidable cause of serious consequences for ACIT. But, at the end of September, there was a general hope for the neutralization of Malta. According to the orders issued by OBS on 22 September, the air offensive over Sicily was to have three phases:

1. day and night actions by bombers to destroy the greatest number of British fighters before they could take off.
2. use of *Stukas* and fighter-bombers escorted by fighters.
3. a huge and continuous use of strongly escorted bombers at high altitude, extending the attacks against the anti-aircraft batteries.

The *II Fliegerkorps* had seven bombing groups at their disposal (all Ju.88, except one He.111) and four groups of fighters (Bf.109), for a total of 156 bombers and 58 efficient fighters. The *Sicilian Air Force* had three bombing groups on its side (Cant. Z.1007 bis), one of dive bombers (Ju.87), three of fighters (Mc.2002), one of fighter-bombers (Re.2001) for a total of 8 dive bombers, 18 bombers, 62 efficient fighters, that is to say less than one third of the whole strength. Add to this the demoralisation and strain of crews and equipment. As stated by Kesselring, German pilots (but this was also true for Italians) found it hard to cross over a large stretch of sea many times a day with the constant risk of falling in water. A nervousness called "Malta ache" was taking root among them. And the island hosted 129 single-engine, 34 twin-engine planes and 5 air-torpedoes, quite a fearsome strength.

A certain tension was undeniable. On 9 October General Amé, head of SIM, had a long conversation with Ciano, where he appeared *"really pessimistic"*. All the information and reasoning, he said, led to the conclusion that the Anglo-Americans were preparing to inflict a tremendous blow on the Axis, and Italy, geographically and logically, seemed the most plausible first target. "*How long would we be strong enough to withstand a serious, heavy and methodical air and naval offensive?*" asked himself the Minister of the Foreign Affairs rhetorically. He then added: *"Amé spoke of this and many other things to Cavallero, but the latter is so deaf, he doesn't want to hear"*[44].

[44] G. CIANO, *op. cit.*, pp. 645-656.

Keitel showed up precisely on the 9th. He was alarmed by the constant ACIT reports, the most recent of which dated two days back, saying that the supplies of fuel, ammunition and foodstuff were running short and it would be *"hard to provide for the most important necessities, all the more so, considering that, according to various indications, in a short while full scale war operations were about to occur"*. Consequently, he was asking for the *"maximum speed"* in intervening to improve the current conditions. Cavallero answered quite generically, but with confidence: the neutralization of Malta was about to begin[45].

The air offensive started on 11 October. After two days, the Axis aviation had lost 24 aircraft. In the morning of the 16th Kesselring showed up at the Supreme Command. Among the many issues discussed, four were of paramount importance: the attack on Malta, the operational reserves of diesel in the Aegean, the provisions for ACIT, the action against Cufra.

Contrary to his written declarations, there is no sign in the logs about the Field Marshal being forced to suspend the aviation attack *"after only three days, due to the severe losses"*[46]. On the contrary, on the sixth day of the bombings, things appeared favourable, as reported in the logs:

> "Marshal Kesselring begins by saying that the Axis aviation losses are high, due to the tactics of the British fighters, tactics based on an attack from high altitude with the sun behind their backs. Enemy losses are much more significant, and yet attacks to achieve a satisfactory neutralization of Malta will last longer than it was planned (in short, about 25 German losses and 7 of ours, about 70 for the enemy).
> (...) The Chief of General Staff informs us that there is a convoy of three ships and another of two *(Tripolino and Schilllin)* ready to depart, all heading west, and asks when it will be possible to anticipate their departure, according to the action in progress on Malta. Marshal Kesselring answered: *"As soon as possible; as of tomorrow, Malta's neutralization will permit to transfer anything we want"* (...)[47].

Regarding diesel, there was more good news. On the 14th the Supreme Command had already been informed by the German military attaché in Rome that the *Kriegsmarine*, satisfied with the Italian decision of moving the centre of gravity of the naval battle to the eastern basin of the

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[45] Cavallero's diary, 10/10/1942.
[46] A. KESSELRING, *op. cit.*, p. 136.
[47] Cavallero's Diary, 16/10/1942.

Mediterranean, would supply the Italian Navy with no less than 40,000 tons of combustible oil in compensation for the inferior quantities coming from Romania. However, this would be done later. At the moment, the SKL would transfer 20,000 tons to the Piraeus and to Suda - taken from the provisions planned for Italy - as an operational reserve for the Italian Navy, but under German management and without promising they would always maintain the same level of supplies. Kesselring, brought up to date on the matter, indicated that he considered the problem *resolved*.

For ACIT, anxiety was still alive, so much so that, due to a temporary lack of fuel, the German air transports from Crete had been suspended. The departure of two known convoys, brought forward to the 19th, could assure a certain level of tranquillity.

Finally, Cufra. Kesselring first asked what Italy's intentions were in the matter, then, considering that, at least for the time, the Supreme Command did not foresee a land action from Gialo and that, on the contrary, the highest priority was given to the constitution of a central manoeuvre mass including the *Spezia*, the *Pavia* and the *Centauro* divisions (which were about to be sent), he said that he agreed.

As it can be seen, the offensive against Malta had much hope of success until 16 October and not even the second matter brought up later by Kesselring to justify the suspension of the bombing was mentioned, that is to say *"the necessity of preserving the efficient reserves for the Anglo-American invasion"*[48]. Besides, one must agree that the OBS was probably the part of the Axis Command most inclined to consider the information about an allied landing on the Mediterranean coasts plausible, especially in Greece or on the large Italian islands or in the French part of North Africa. This consideration was supported by the intelligence coming from various parts, about huge concentrations of merchant ships in the ports of the southwestern England and big piles of materials in the open air, as well as increased sea traffic around Gibraltar.

Suddenly the sky darkened. On 15 October Admiral Wiechold sent a dispatch to SKL. He underlined the deficit in the supply of diesel oil for September to the Italian Navy, and specified that the worrying shortage of incoming supplies until 10 October made him think that another huge cut was to be expected in October too.

> "And so", he stressed, "despite the supplementary provision of 12,000 tons of diesel oil from the German Navy reserves, the fuel situation is

[48] A. KESSELRING, *op. cit.*, p. 136.

getting very serious for the Italian Navy, such that it may compromise the normal operational tasks in a decisive way and soon make them impracticable.

German Navy Headquarters points out in the most categorical way that if Italo-German war interests cannot be placed before the ones related to the internal supply of fuel in Romania, *the situation with the conduction of the war and the supplies in the Mediterranean will shortly become catastrophic*".

The Supreme Command also made its calculations:

Stock of diesel oil in the depots and on board	25,000 tons
Supply from Germany and Romania until 10 October	14,000 tons
Total availability on 10 October	39,000 tons
Consumption from 1 to 14 October	23,000 tons
Left-over stock on 14 October	16,000 tons
Needs for the period of 15 through 31 October	30,000 tons
Forecast of the flow from Germany and Romania	11,000 tons
Deficit	19,000 tons

Cavallero informed Mussolini of these calculations and explained that the negative difference could be faced by mixing 9,000 tons of heavy crude with as much diesel and oil. He was not, however, able to come up with any independent solution, also because Kesselring, struck by a "bleeding" that had not decreased the aircraft potential of Malta at all - losses had reached 42 airplanes and on the 17th two *Luftwaffe* aces were killed - decided to only send his bombers at night, and to decrease the pressure over the island. Further aircraft losses led him to suspend the offensive on 20 October, with an admission of his failure. The Axis had lost 48 aircraft, 10 of which Italian, versus 132 said to be shot down by the British side. The *Royal Air Force* had lost 32 airplanes, versus about a hundred said to be shot down by the Italo-German side. Kesselring was not wrong about the effects of the raids: no Maltese airport had remained inefficient for more than half an hour, the aircraft on the island had continued assailing the naval traffic to Libya unhindered, and losses had immediately been replaced by 29 *Spitfires*, launched from the aircraft carrier, *Furious*.

The decision was also affected by Goering's intervention, worried about the strain on the *Luftwaffe*, but Cavallero was left embittered as he could see the impossibility of solving the three important questions that were getting hopelessly entangled: diesel fuel for the Italian Navy, sup-

plies for ACIT and transport of at least three divisions to Tripolitania for the eventual occupation of Tunisia (Operation C4) and for an availability, even if minor, of reserves in the theatre. And Malta was considered the centre of gravity for the Mediterranean problem.

On the 22nd of October in Taormina, in the branch office of the OBS, a high level summit took place to examine the overall situation. It may be interesting to look at the Italian and German assumptions.

Cavallero based his arguments on the worse hypothesis formulated by Mussolini: a short term offensive by the enemy on the Egyptian front, from Cufra and the Libyan Sahara and in the Aegean. For the moment there was no fear for the Tunisian border "*which would come into play at a later time*"[49]. The landing of the Allies in North Africa took place sixteen days later.

Kesselring believed that there was no relevant news in Egypt and that, if the British offensive were to start, it would be more for political than military reasons. There was no alarm about either Crete and Rhodes or Cufra. In short, "*today the Egyptian and Libyan situation is not worrying, but it may soon become so*". The next day the third and last battle of El Alamein started, and it was one of the most decisive battles of the Second World War.

No one wants to make ironic comments about the operational hypotheses reported above. It is too easy to deliver a judgement with hindsight. On the other hand, if Cavallero and Kesselring had been able to read in a crystal ball that in the evening of 23rd of October Montgomery would attack with the powerful 8th Army and destroy ACIT and that on 8 November the Anglo-Americans would land in Morocco and Algeria, *at that point,* what concrete steps would they have been able to take, different from those they had taken on the basis of inexact hypotheses?

The minutes from Taormina reported good intentions and signs of powerlessness. ACIT - in everybody's mind - was lacking men, materials, vehicles and above all fuel, so much so that on the 29th it would only have a one-day supply of fuel at its disposal, while the supplies for *Fliegerführer* and for the 5th Air Squadron would decrease to 1,500 tons.

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[49] The day before, von Rintelen informed Cavallero about the opinion of the OKW, concerning the necessity of preparing the defence of the western border of Libya and of planning an action in Tunisia. "*Do we have to land before or after the enemy?*" asked Cavallero. "*Immediately after*", answered von Rintelen, "*depending on the French reaction*" (Cavallero's diary, October 21st).

Riccardi, in agreement with Weichold, warned that, admitting but not guaranteeing the possibility of receiving 40,000 tons of diesel a month, it would only be enough to assure an ordinary supply to ACIT, and Fougier, in support, specified that the Air Force had 11,000 tons a month at its disposal versus the 22,000 tons required.

It is painful to read the *directives* that Cavallero was forced to give and share with Kesselring:

1. Continue with fuel transports with maximum efforts.
2. The Air Force must get equipped for air transport of fuel.
3. It has been decided that the transports to the western route are indispensable, but it has also been agreed that they cannot affect the ones for the armoured vehicles.
4. It is indispensable to keep Malta in mind for the western route and a further contact between Marshal Kesselring and Excellency Fougier to discuss this matter is necessary.
5. Maximum efficiency is attributed to protection during day hours, but there is still the problem with protection during the night, for which the OBS will make the greatest effort.
6. It is necessary for the Committee to study all the details regarding the conduction of convoys, to see if it is possible to allow some convoys to navigate during the day time as well.
7. The Italian Navy should experiment with lead rockets (against air-torpedoes) which are at the Air Force's disposal"[50].

Now, the OKW also started to become seriously interested in the Mediterranean and von Rintelen reported the German point of view to the Supreme Command. Among other things, the OKW hoped to quickly establish supplies in Libya for 30 days of provisions and fuel and 8 days of ammunition.

It was too late.

[50] The meeting underlined the worry for espionage. The existence of *Ultra* was unknown, and therefore the British punctuality in attacking the supplies sent to Libya caused a certain alarm and diffidence. On October 9th, during a meeting about convoys with Cavallero and Kesselring, Sansonetti informed that *"the ships which leave suddenly are not attacked, and that makes us think about espionage. He excludes that the news may have its source in the ports and affirms that they come from Rome"*. And on October 11th, during the usual meeting regarding transportation, he insisted on the issue and communicated that: *"the naval information service doubts there may have been leakage of information through spies just because, in the case of sudden departures of the ships, the attacks are random and delayed"*. These doubts, naturally, were shared by the Germans, not able to conceive that it was their *Enigma* to cause such troubles.

2. The Eve of the ACIT Battle

After a short settling-in period, General Stumme expressed his assessment of the situation to Cavallero, which closely followed Rommel's words: confidence in blocking the enemy offensive, the probability that the offensive could be sustained by wide ranging actions in the areas behind Cirenaica, the necessity for a better level of supplies and for the completion of the units. There was also a warlike note, probably, inserted to satisfy the ambition of Rome and, to be precise, also that of Berlin:

> "I undoubtedly agree with Marshal Rommel that it would be desirable to prevent the big enemy offensive with an attack of our own. This attack should have as a first step the objective of destroying the 8th Army. Further objectives would be to conquer Alexandria and then to operate in the direction of Cairo and towards the Suez canal.
> Given the present air and naval strategic situation in the Mediterranean, I do not believe it is possible to promptly transport the necessary materials and reinforcements in the short term. On the contrary, it seems possible to me to pass from a certainly victorious defence of a great British attack to a counterattack. The aim of this counterattack would be, in the first place, to destroy the 8th Army and then take possession of Alexandria. It is not yet possible, so far, to foresee whether such an operation can be directed toward Cairo.
> The essential condition for implementing such a counterattack is, as always, a strong provision of supplies, as the intensification of supplies represents a decisive problem for the further conduction of operations (...)"[51].

To avoid any misunderstandings, Stumme had requested a considerable amount of materials *for the counterattack*. We can bet that the request implicitly also considered a defensive battle. Anyway, it was not only doubtful, but even unrealistic that such a premise would occur. Unfortunately, indeed, between 8 and 23 October, the number of ships sunk by the enemy increased and the loss of materials reached 44% of what was sent and surpassed 51% for fuel.

Although the period between the 2nd and the 3rd battle of El Alamein was used by both armies to make preparations, single raids and local actions on both sides were frequent. The enemy aimed at spotting minefields, assessing the solidity of the Italo-German positions and conquering

[51] DSCS, f. 119/42 Secr., ACIT 3/10/1942.

some key positions; ACIT focused on acquiring information, hindering the activity of the patrols and improving the battle array. Among the most significant events was the attack by the enemy in the morning of 30 September against Deir el Munassib, on the southern flank of the front.

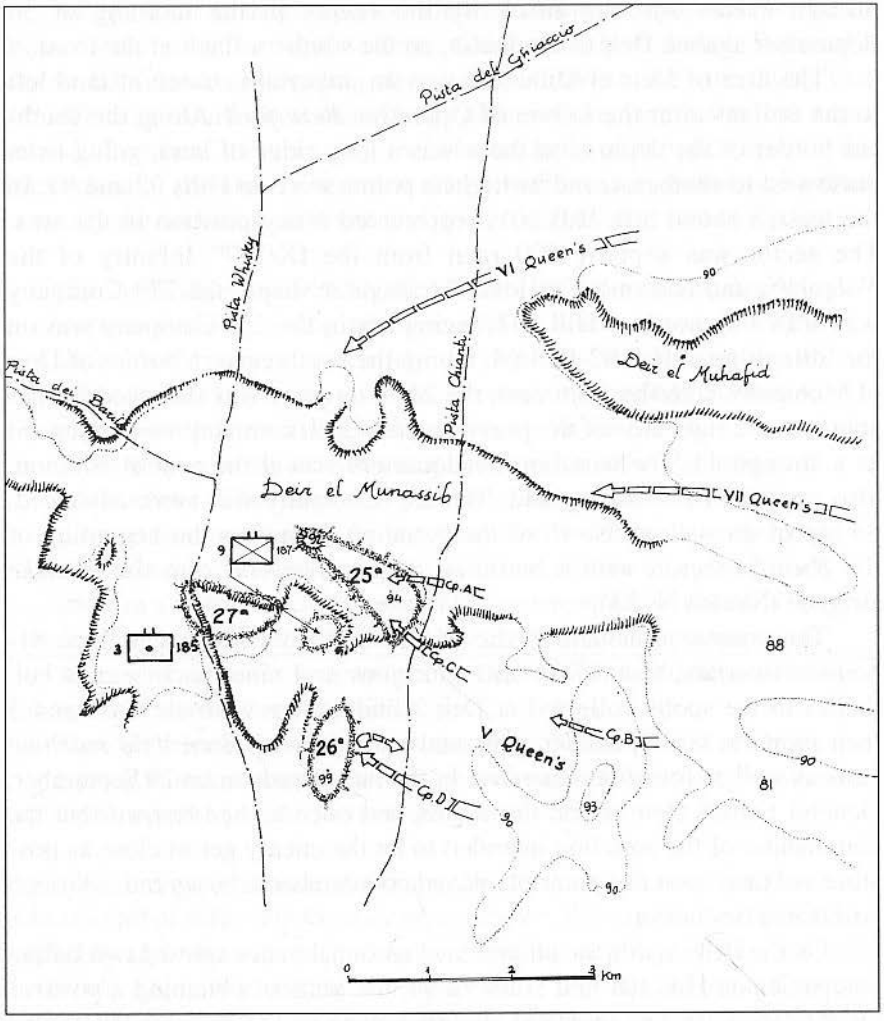
The area of Deir el Munassib was an important stretch of land left to the Italians after the failure of Operation *Beresford*. Along the southern border of the depression there was a long ridge of land, going from northwest to southeast, and its highest points were on Hills 92 and 94. In the west, a round hill, Hill 101, represented a key position in the area. The sector was kept by 500 men from the IX/187th Infantry of the *Folgore*[52], and had, more or less, a triangular shape; the 27th Company was drawn up north of Hill 101, facing north; the 25th Company was on the little ridge at Hill 92-Hill 94, facing the south-eastern border of Deir el Munassib, with the front east; the 26th Company was stationed further south, to the right side of the previous one. Each company was organized as a stronghold. The battalion headquarters was at the central position, also organized as a stronghold. The 25th Company was more advanced, on top of the salient. North of the battalion there was the beginning of the *Brescia* sector, with a battalion of paratroopers from the *Ramcke* Brigade (Sketch N. 33).

The organic armament of the IX/187 Infantry consisted in three 81-pounder mortars, four 47/32 anti-tank guns and nine machineguns but, thanks to the spoils collected at Deir Alinda, there were eleven 2 and 3 inch mortars, ten 2-pounder guns and about twenty *Bren light machine guns* as well as four *Bren-carriers*. In the late afternoon on 29 September, General Ferrari Orsi visited the sector, and once he had learned that the commander of the battalion intended to let the enemy get as close as possible and then open fire point-blank and counterattack, he agreed, although with some hesitation.

On the British side the air and land reconnaissance spotted two Italian companies on Hill 101 and Hills 92-94, but without obtaining a positive identification (it was supposed they belonged to the *Trieste*). They also found the northern margin of the depression evacuated, or mostly. One can see how important this operation was for the British 13th Corps considering the forces employed to bring the operation to a successful end: the 131st Infantry Brigade (General Frith), made up of the 5th, 6th and 7th Battalions of the *Queen's Royal Regiment*, supported by the fire of nine regiments of field artillery and one heavy field, as well as a tank unit.

[52] The IX battalion had absorbed the remains of the X/187° Inf.

Sketch N. 33
"THE FIGHT AT DEIR EL MUNASSIB (30 SEPTEMBER)"



At 4:15 on 30 September, the British started getting closer, protected by strong artillery fire.

But things did not go as hoped. While the 6th Battalion was easily able to occupy the northern margin of Deir el Munassib and the 7th managed to reach the eastern edge with just a few losses caused by the minefields, the 5th had to face the positions defended by IX/187th Infantry, which had survived the British artillery fire unharmed. The response of the defence was vigorous and surprised the attackers; at the same time, the III/185th

Artillery of the *Folgore* was joining the action. In the morning, the 5th *Queen's* was annihilated: two companies were destroyed, one was decimated. The losses suffered by the 131st Brigade were as follows: 23 officers, 359 between non-commissioned officers and troops, of whom 150 were taken prisoner. The IX/187th Infantry had 20 dead and 25 wounded, mostly members of the 25th Company.

General Horrocks, commander of the 13th Corps, and General Hughes, commander of the 44th Infantry Division reached the Headquarters of the unlucky brigade in the morning and, at first, they intended to resume the attack with the VII *Queen's* at 19:25. But due to a series of difficulties they were forced to shift the time of attack, first to 3 o'clock on 1 October, then to 15:00 on the same day. Finally, considering that the surprise had been lost and the defenders were now ready to fight, they decided to cancel the operation.

The ACIT formations made improvements through the entire month of October. They consisted in a satisfying system of minefields, from 5 to 7 kilometres deep, in a sinusoidal shape from the sea to the Qattara Depression, mostly in two continuous, parallel strips, at a distance varying from 2 to 4 kilometres from each other and linked by other mine strips. They appeared as a series of boxes, bounded by mine strips and barbed wire obstacles used to slow down and block the enemy's penetrations (sheet A). These boxes were distinguished by letters: H, J, L and K around the British salient of Tell el Eisa; B, C, D in the central section of Ruweisat, up to Bab el Qattara included. South of the last box, up to the high plateau of el Taqa, the mined system got lighter; there was only one mine strip with some simple box outlines. However, from Bab el Qattara there were more mined strips going southeastwards, which, from Deir Alinda and Deir el Munassib up to Qaret el Himeimat, were identified with two well-known British minefields: *February* and *January*, now more tangled than ever.

The minefields were spread along the northern margin of the Qattara Depression, from Qaret el Himeimat to Naqb Abu Dweis, but not in a system; they were mostly used to protect a few static structures built on the southern border of ACIT. In the end, another two belts, each placed on two strips, were extended behind the centre of the formation; one in an equatorial direction to protect the right side of the northern sector; the second in a southerly direction to contain the enemy in case it managed to break through centrally and in case it tried to converge the attack northwards, as well as a pivot for the manoeuvre of the armoured reserves. Rommel

talked about it in his report on 22 September: "*Between the two armoured groups north and south, we built a very big mined obstacle which will stop the enemy at the height of El Ruweisat*". The probability assigned to this theoretical British manoeuvre led to frenetic work in order to complete the block as soon as possible. Indeed, it was completed shortly before the battle. Unfortunately, Montgomery's offensive would follow a different concept and the two mined belts would end up hampering the manoeuvre of the Italo-German armoured reserves and hindering the flow of supplies from the central sector.

The defensive position included a security line, which coincided with the front margin of the advanced minefields; a security zone made up of the entire depth of the mined strips (therefore 5-7 kilometres); a resistance position to the rear of the preceding, 2-3 kilometres deep with a front margin, that is to say the line of resistance, supported on the western border by a second mined strip; finally, an area where the army corps and army artillery was drawn up and an area for the detachment of the armoured reserves.

The security line, called the *line of outposts* by the ACIT Headquarters, was controlled by platoon and detached company strongholds immediately opposite the advanced minefields. In this way, they could not only carry out the normal tasks of observation and signalling, but also prevent the recognition of the mine fields and the opening of corridors by the enemy, and put up the first resistance, sufficient to break the vehemence of the attack and direct it towards established areas.

The security area appeared as a sea of mines and traps, artifices, airplane bombs, grids. A complex of *Teufelgarten* (devil's gardens): Rommel really counted on its obstructive power.

The position of resistance was basically founded on a unique order of battalion strongholds (divided into company strongholds) and companies, too. Considering the poor available forces in comparison with the extension of the front, it was impossible to do more. That is why the direct control of the battalion had to be spread over a front of about three kilometres. Only in the central section could they proceed with the building of some second level battalion structures.

In short, it was a defensive position which, not being able to establish solid posts on the terrain, except for some stretches, intended to exploit the most of the deep opposite area with obstacles and firepower, in order to stop the attack, split it up and divert it towards the areas designated to destroy the enemy. Overall, almost a million mines were buried there, mostly anti-tank.

The integrity of the line of resistance was therefore an indispensable condition for holding the positions and, in the end, winning the defensive battle. Only by wearing down the attack while passing beyond the security area and by stopping on the line of resistence, would it be possible to direct the armoured reserves at the right time and use them to patch the leaks and eliminate the penetrations. Indeed, these reserves would hardly be able to face the mass of British tanks, superior in quality and quantity, if they managed to break through and reach the open field. To these considerations one should add the limited range of the Italian artillery, which inevitably led to project the artillery onto the strongholds, including that of the armoured divisions.

The 21st and 10th Army Corps were deployed in the first echelon, while the armoured divisions of the DAK and of the 20th Corps constituted the reserve. Some units were taken from the defence of the El Alamein line, both to rearrange them better and to protect the whole coast. So the *Trieste* and the 90th Light were stationed between Sibi Abd el Rahman and Ras Kenays; the 580th Reconnaissance Group followed, up to Matruh, then the 288th Regiment *Panzergrenadiere* (the Menton unit) up to Sidi el Barrani. These units, especially the two motorized divisions, could be called to the battlefield at any moment. The *Giovani Fascisti* Division was detached inland, at Siwa, together with the 3rd German Reconnaissance Group. A little further behind them, in Bardia, the *Pistoia* Infantry Division units were converging, which depended on *Delease*.

The 21st Corps had control of the British salient of Tell el Eisa together with the *Trento* and the 164th German Infantry Division. The following units formed a line from the sea: the 7th *Bersaglieri* Regiment, the 125th German Infantry Regiment, the 62nd Infantry Regiment, the 382nd German Infantry Regiment, the 61st Infantry Regiment, the 433rd German Infantry Regiment, in alternating battalions. Until the beginning of October, the formation had different characteristics, as the battalions not only occupied the backside of the boxes H, J, L, K and B, but also garrisoned the gaps, and so each gap was surrounded on the three internal sides by the strongholds. In order to assure the continuity of the resistance, Stumme ordered the groups detached in the gaps to withdraw and to complete the defence behind the backside margin of the mined belt by 20 October. This amendment caused a problem near the Miteiriya ridge. There would be an empty area of resistance here and between the boxes L and K, in the area in front and in the minefields. Thus, if the enemy entered this area (as it then happened during battle), it would be able to destroy all the headquarters and artillery observation posts that were stationed there, and it could reach a

suitable distance to attack and would have a level advantage over the strongholds. Moreover, the enemy would be able to disrupt any of our movements behind the line and, conversely, could allow the other British troops to assemble under cover to easily broaden the gaps. The movements for the occupation of new positions started on 18 October, by company echelons on a daily basis, and finished on the 20th, except for the I/62nd Infantry (extreme left of the *Trento*) which, in order to not leave empty gaps between the right side of 125th *Panzergrenadiere* (not ready to withdraw) and itself, started on the 20th, and completed the manoeuvres between 22 and 23 October.

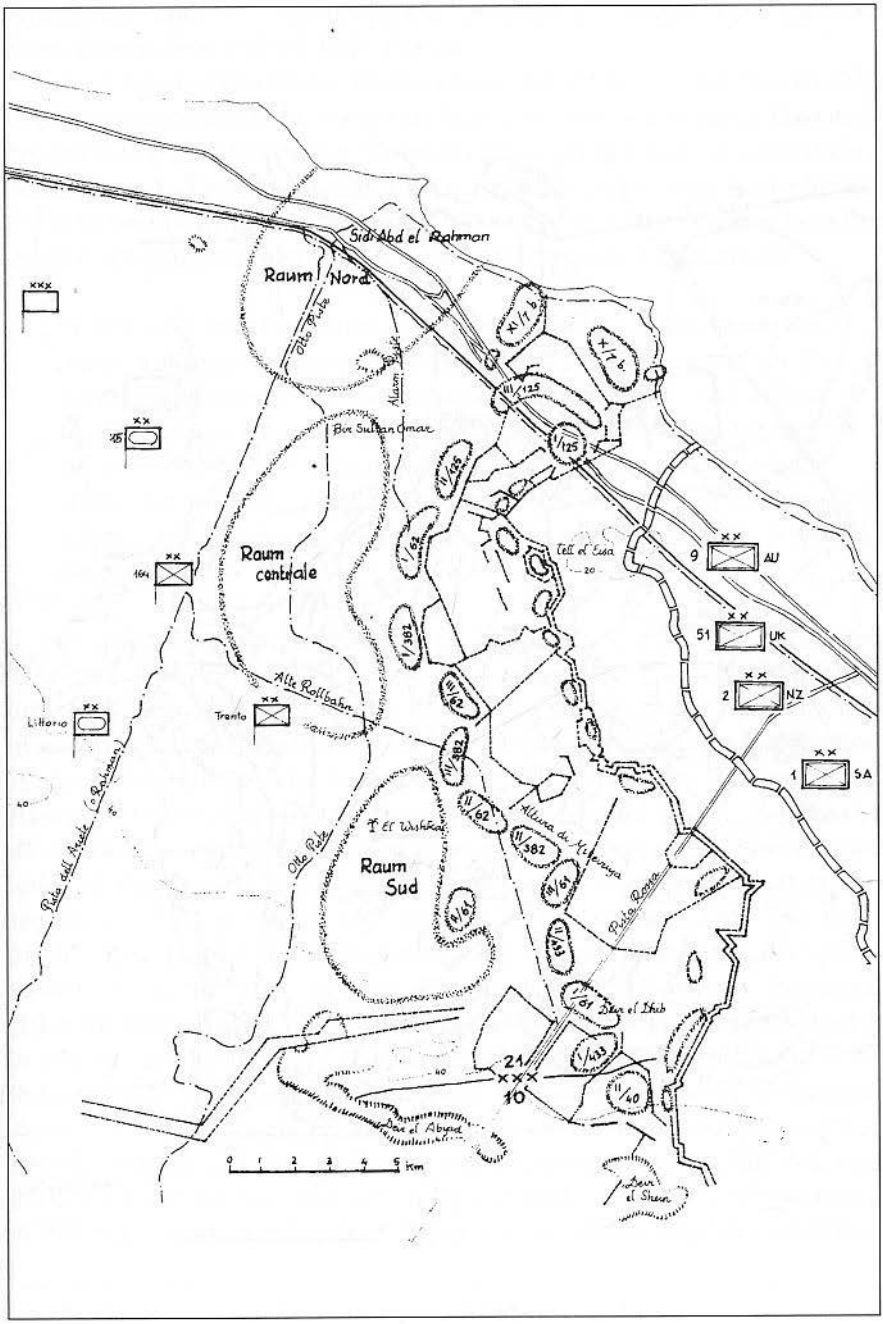
The *Bologna* and the 40th Infantry Regiment were in front of Ruweisat in Deir el Shein, two paratrooper battalions from the *Ramcke* Brigade on the western side of Ruweisat and the 39th Infantry Regiment in El Mreir (Sketch N. 34).

The 10th Corps stretched, together with the *Brescia*, astride the *Tonnen Piste* (Barrel Track): the 20th Infantry Regiment and the 28th Battalion of the 9th *Bersaglieri* Regiment were stationed in the Bab el Qattara zone, followed by the *Burckardt* Paratrooper Battalion, then the 19th Infantry Regiment and, in the end, there was the *Hübner* German Paratrooper Battalion in Deir Alinda. The *Folgore,* together with the 187th Infantry Regiment, was in the Deir el Munassib sector from Deir el Munassib to Qaret el Himeimat. The 8th Combat Sappers Battalion and the II/28th *Pavia* Infantry Regiment was in the central position and the 186th Infantry Regiment extended up to Qaret el Heimemat and Naqb Rala. The right side of the corps was controlled by the *Pavia* with the II/27 Infantry and the *Kampfstaffel* (or Kasta), the fighting echelon constituted to protect the ACIT Headquarters (Sketch N. 35).

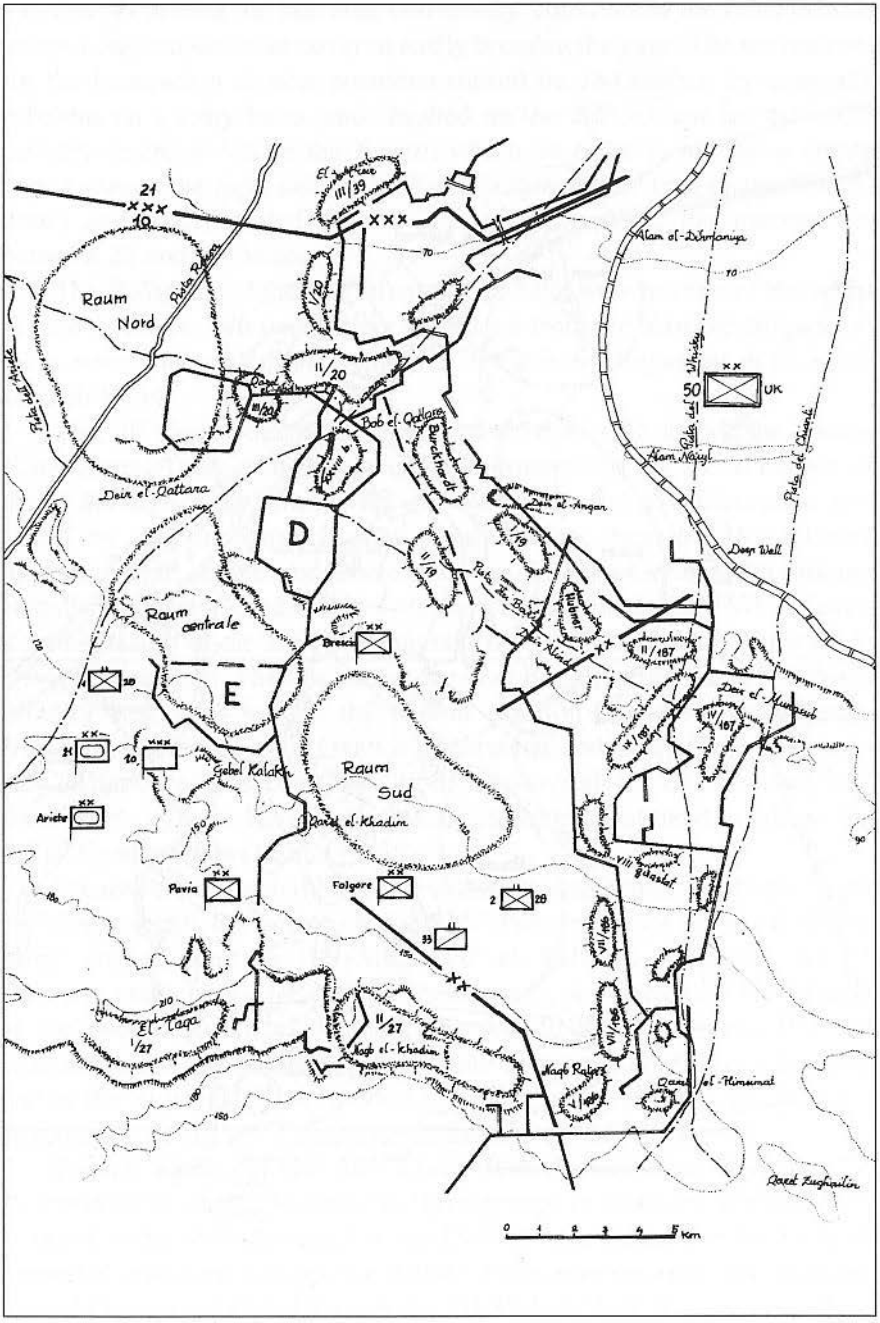
There were armoured divisions behind the resistance positions. In the 13th Corps sector, the *Littorio* and the 15th *Panzerdivision* were gathered in three groups: one in the Sibi Abd el Rahman area (the I/115th *Panzergrenadiere* and the LI/133rd Armoured), one astride the Otto Track, at the height of Tell el Aqqaqir (the XXIII/12th *Bersaglieri*, IV/133rd Armoured, the III/115th *Panzergrenadiere* and the II/8th *Panzer*); the third one in the El Wishka area (the XXXVI/12th *Bersaglieri* and the XII/133rd Armoured, the II/115th *Panzergrenadiere* and the 1/8th *Panzer*).

Further south, in the 10th Corps sector, the *Ariete* and the 21st *Panzerdivision* were articulated in three groups as well: one north of Deir el Qattara (the V/8th *Bersaglieri*, the IX/132nd Armoured and the VI Self-propelled Anti-tank Group, the I/104th *Panzergrenadiere*); one between Deir el Qattara and Gebel Kalakh (the III/8th Anti-Tank *Bersaglieri* and the

Sketch N. 34
"THE FORMATION OF THE XXI ARMY CORPS ON 23 OCTOBER"



Sketch N. 35
"THE FORMATION OF THE X ARMY CORPS ON 23 OCTOBER"



XIII/132nd Tankmen, the II/104th *Panzergrenadiere* and the I/5th *Panzer*), and the third, east of Qaret el Khadim (the XII/8th *Bersaglieri*, X/132nd Armoured and V Self-propelled Anti-tank Group, the III/104th *Panzergrenadiere* and the II/5th *Panzer*).

Now we should address the intermingling of troops issue, remarkably implemented between the *Trento* and the 164th German Infantry Division. We have already talked about the reasons that led Rommel to make such a decision: he had adopted it after the crisis in July, when there was a breakdown in the Italian formations, finding it met his expectations thanks to the general strengthening deriving from the better German armament:

> "I will make the Duce aware of the necessity of equipping the Italian Army with more modern equipment", he wrote in his report on 22 September directed to the commanders of the large units. "All actions fought until now have demonstrated that the Italian units could not operate or even advance without the support of the German ones, which are armed in a better and more modern way. This disadvantage has been patched up so far by grouping Italian and German units, but this is not the perfect solution (...)"[53].

Another reason may be added to the so-called official explanation: a defensive position based on a German framework filled with Italian units was considered more solid, as it would not present any sector weak in armaments and morale to the enemy. While the measure - not original at all, as it had already been implemented in ancient Rome and by Hannibal - was accepted to a certain extent at minor levels, also due to the spirit of camaraderie created during the various events and vicissitudes of the war in Africa, it was immediately considered as an undeserved humiliation by the high-ranking Italian commanders. The units did not feel and were not responsible for the armament, the divisional structures or the poor logistic system. The commanders, therefore, although they admitted that, in general, German groups performed better in combat, could not stand the self-importance and distrust towards the Italian soldier. It was not about jealousy, but self-esteem. But, aside from the psychological repercussions, difficulties concerning competence had already emerged. It was a serious matter indeed, considering that two thirds of the front was constituted by a chaotic succession of battalions of different organic and tactical dependences. When asked for clarifica-

[53] Historical diary of the XX Army Corps, 22/9/1942.

tion about this matter by the Supreme Command, the ACIT Headquarters answered on 24 September:

> "1. The Italian and German troops employed in mixed formations in the defence depend, as before, on their higher headquarters from both points of view: tactical and logistic. The commanders who are stationed at the adjacent headquarters receive the same orders and take their dispositions collaborating side by side.
> 2. This tactical independence and this responsibility of the Italian and German troops employed in a common or intermingled form will be maintained also during mobile actions. Due to differences in speed between the Italian and German motorised groups, such strict mixing will not, presumably, be possible in the mobile actions or in the defence.
> 3. Until now we have only had experience in the defensive field. Here, mixing and collaboration have achieved brilliant results so far.
> 4. In order to simplify the transmission of orders and communication, we employed German radios in the Italian headquarters. This is particularly important for the Italian motorised groups, whose stations cannot work while they are moving".

Such an evasive and vague answer left a serious problem with the absence of a true distribution in the divisional and regimental sectors, and the undefined responsibility for the defence from the battalion level up. There were a lot of uncertainties regarding the armoured mixed groups, too. The ACIT Headquarters itself had postponed any decision to the moment of operational commitment. Indeed, in the beginning, the idea was to entrust such merged groups to the commanders of the DAK, in the north, and to the 20th Corps in the south, but the plan was then suspended and they decided to define the constitution, tasks and command of the armoured formations according to the contingent situation.

A few words about the commanders must be said. On his departure, Rommel did not oppose giving leave to high ranking officers, but the leaders had all arrived in Africa recently, or taken over their commands after the death or repatriation of their predecessors[54].

As of June, the following Italian commanders had been killed: Generals Baldassare (20th Corps), Ferrari Orsi (10th Corps) and Predieri

[54] On August 22nd, *Delease* ordered the retreat off the line and the alternation of the weekly quota of 100 men per each regiment, replacing the departures with the reserves. Moreover, the level of force of the units was such that it seems the measure never came into force.

(*Brescia* Infantry Div.). Generals Lombardi and Oxilia (the *Brescia* Infantry Div.), Ceriana Mayneri (the *Littorio* Arm. Div.), Infante (the *Ariete* Arm. Div.) had been repatriated because wounded or sick. General Navarini (21st Corps), Gioda (10th Corps), Azzi (*Trieste* Motorized Division), Franceschini and Torriano (*Pavia* Infantry Division) and Gotti (*Trento* Infantry Division) repatriated on turn over. The 5th Air Squadron had changed commander too: General Bernasconi had replaced General Marchesi, who returned to Italy. The substitution of General Ferrari Orsi was the most laborious one. It was initially decided to choose General Pafundi, stationed in Greece, but when he met Cavallero in Rome on 23 October, he refused, due to personal difficulties with General Barbasetti, junior to him. In the end, General Nebbia, who commanded the *Ravenna* Infantry Division on the Russian front, was chosen. Navarini, who returned to Italy at the end of September, before the arrival of his successor, would then be sent to Egypt to take the 21st Corps again when the battle had already begun.

There was also much news among the German commanders. General Cruwell (the DAK) was taken prisoner, von Bismarck (the 21st *Panzer*) was dead; Nehring (the DAK) and Kleeman (the 90th Light) were repatriated as wounded. The new commanders: General von Vaerst (the 15th *Panzer*) and von Randow (the 21st *Panzer*) were returning to the front after being repatriated for wounds.

So, ACIT got ready for the inevitable attack.

According to the intelligence service, apart from the forces detached to the Delta, the 8th Army had 8 infantry and 3 armoured divisions, 4 independent infantry brigades and 1 armoured at its disposal, versus the ACIT's 8 infantry divisions, 4 armoured divisions and 1 brigade of paratroopers, which seemed to be a reasonable and favourable force ratio for the defence. In fact, the British tanks were estimated as 1,000 versus 500 medium Italo-German tanks, the artillery was assumed to be superior and the availability of ammunition and enemy fuel supplies were known to be immense. Regarding aviation, the Axis had about 700 aircraft at its disposal, while the *Royal Air Force,* according to the Cairo Radio, had three times as many fighters and even more bombers.

The accusation directed at Stumme, regarding a presumed wait and see attitude and the absence of a well-formulated manoeuvre plan, does not seem plausible. On the one hand, one must underline Bayerlein's state-

[55] B. LIDDELL HART, *The Rommel Papers*, *op. cit.*, p. 300.

ments, according to which Stumme followed Rommel's spirit of orders and recommendations exactly, on the other hand, one must remember the defensive concept of the ACIT formation: block the entire El Alamein gap with a fortified front; force the enemy to conceive the breakthrough tactics as the only way to win the battle; resist on the positions to the bitter end and employ the armoured divisions wherever the enemy tried to infiltrate. Rommel knew well that the British troops were particularly suited for this kind of combat, and unfortunately the anti-personnel landmines were limited, but "*I didn't want to create an embarrassing situation again, and stop the battle due to the lack of fuel. In a manoeuvred defensive battle a lack of fuel means catastrophe*", he explained[56].

It must be said that the ammunition situation was quite worrying too. For the Italians, serious in general, it appeared disastrous for the armour piercing ammunition, especially for 8, 20 and 47 calibres, of which next to nothing remained at the North African Logistic Headquarters. Unfortunately, *the assignments* for October, arranged by the Military State were ever more limited. For instance, instead of the 210,000 47 a/p rounds requested, only 20,000 were assigned, instead of the 25 million 8 piercing munitions, there were just 1 million, instead of 560,000 20 a/p rounds the assignment was 130,000. There were no 75/46 and 75/50 piercing grenades. In compensation, the request for 8,500 88/55 and 6,000 90/53 armour piercing shells was satisfied. The production in Italy was inadequate and, although all the possibilities were combed, all the assignments to large units in urban territories were reduced, and yet the revenue did not even cover the monthly average of consumption.

There is no reason to believe the hypothesis presented by Alexander that the DAK and the 20th Corps would dissolve all over the front, as had already happened in Russia, thanks to Stumme's suggestion and initiative. The two armies, if concentrated, would necessarily be distant from the position of resistance, to the detriment of timeliness of intervention. Considering Rommel's defensive concept and considering the weak belt of strongholds, it was natural to articulate the reserves in quotas, and keep them behind the static structures.

As for the presumed lack of precise criteria about how to conduct the battle, the accusation, formulated in relation to a letter sent by Stumme to Cavallero on 3rd October, is probably exaggerated. It is true that there is no explicit indication of preparations for countering the enemy courses of action, but it is known that there was a drill performed in October that can-

[56] *Ibid.*, p. 298.

not be logically omitted from the contingent situation. Rather, it seems that aside from a general and conscious alarm, Stumme had not perceived the danger related to the new moon, and that the ACIT intelligence service had not realised the level of organisation of the 8th Army. This should not be intended as a criticism of the Axis intelligence service, but rather an acknowledgement of the ability of the British to implement a deception plan.

In the morning of October 8th, Stumme had a briefing with the commanders of the 21th Corps, the *Littorio*, the 15th *Panzer* and the 164th Infantry Division, proposing the possibility, quite obvious for the presence of much indisputable evidence, of the imminent enemy offensive, but without being able to indicate the probable direction of the attack. The probable time: not before 20 October. Everything had also been repeated to the commanders of the 10th and 20th Corps and the DAK.

The bulletin issued by ACIT on October 10th illustrated the enemy situation quite realistically and concluded with the following considerations:

> "9. The British 8th Army has now reached, if not surpassed, the fighting power it had at the beginning of the Italo-German offensive in May.
> The preparation of the reinforcements of infantry and tanks, a major activity by British air force, the movement forward of the logistic headquarters, the constitution of an advanced tactical headquarters of the army (in the area 20 kilometres south-west of Hammam), according to the informers, are the signs of an imminent British attack on a grand scale.
> It has to be considered that, in this case, the enemy will attack all over the front. A strong reconnaissance activity of the enemy in the southern sector lets us presume, with good reason, that the point of gravity of the enemy attack will be south of Ruweisat. Moreover, there will probably be a massive attack astride the coastal carriageway.
> On the contrary, due to the bad road conditions in the Qattara Depression, the attack against the south flank of the army is not probable.
> There were no significant preparations to attack the deep side of the army, through Cufra and Siwa, therefore, such an attack is not currently probable.
> However, it is certain that the enemy will try to land over numerous points of the coast of North Africa before and after the attack. Moreover, the enemy will probably support its offensive with a major air attack, its aviation being numerically predominant.
> There is a great deal of contrasting information about the time of the offensive. Since the approach of the units and the artillery designated to attack requires at least 1-2 days, our divisions cannot be surprised by the

attack if they just keep their eyes wide open and exploit all the possibilities of observation".

In all likelihood, the last paragraph mirrors the relative sense of general tranquillity. It should be pointed out that the head of the ACIT information office inserted in the draft of the bulletin the phrase, *"the offensive will probably start on 23 October"*. Westphal justifiably did not want to indicate a precise date, because if the operation did not start on the indicated day, the intelligence service of the army would lose credibility. So he preferred to write: *"between 20 and 25 October"*. The note was then completely ignored[57].

At the same time, the troops were informed about the probable course of the attack and received orders to maintain positions and continue to fight even if surrounded, in order to facilitate the planned local counterattacks.

Since the battle might assume an unusual intensity and duration, it was necessary to be prepared and save the ammunition in advance, that is to say, during the weeks preceding the offensive, and give up any artillery intervention if not *"provoked by the enemy and seriously threatening the positions"*. To this regard, there is a melancholic note written in the war diary of the 21st *Panzer*, which says a lot about the atmosphere. There it is written that the intervention of this division in the battle *"will probably consume all our current availability of ammunition and fuel"*. There is also another symptomatic element: the plan of the counter-preparation was based on the concept of fighting the opponent at his departure bases, in order to confuse the formations, but the implementation of such a plan required the certainty that these bases were actually occupied.

The usual raging raids of the *Royal Air Force* were not significant until the 19th. The British aviation had reached such a superiority that it was allowed almost everything. Many cities behind the front, especially on the coastal belt, were quite often subject to air raids, some of which very violent. The majority of the bombings were on Tobruk, and then (in decreasing order): Bengasi, Matruh, Bardia, Fuka and Bug Bug. On October 9th, the waves of fighters and bombers blew over the El Alamein positions and its immediate backside. The objective was to check the response of Axis, to provoke a strong loss of fuel, the deficit of which was well-known, and to shake the ACIT morale through a huge demonstration

[57] HANS-OTTO BEHERENDT, *Rommel kenntis vom Fein dim Afrika Feldzug*, Freiburg, Rombech, 1980, pp. 248-249.

[58] Historical diary of the XXI Army Corps, f. 6703/Op., 12/10/1942.

of force. This result was not obtained, but undoubtedly the damage suffered by our frail logistic apparatus, the columns of vehicles and artillery formations was felt significantly.

Not much could be prized out of the prisoners about Montgomery's intentions. On the 19th the *Delease* intelligence bulletin related that *"there are rumours circulating about the 8th British Army offensive and that there is much confidence in its results;"* but, objectively, that was not much. And even if Stumme advised that the enemy could attack anytime and everywhere on the 20th, possibly concentrating the effort against *"the northern side of our southern sector"*, it was just speculation, not information from unequivocal sources.

From 19 until 23 October, once the sand storms stopped, the *Royal Air Force* made what could then be considered a real preparation for the offensive, hammering the resistance position and the most sensitive points of the areas behind the front, especially the advanced aviation fields. The response of the Italo-German fighters was energetic, but while they managed to inflict damage on the enemy, they could not avoid their own, and in this way the already existing imbalance increased. Montgomery commented on the fact, saying that the superiority of the British Aviation was so great that *"during the day of 23 October our airplanes continued to patrol over the enemy landing fields without being disturbed"*[59].

And that was not all. Air reconnaissance had the most important task in intelligence activities, and there is still one page missing about it. Let's give the enemy the stage once again:

> "Although there were difficulties and gaps in the British information service before (...) the battle of El Alamein, they were nothing compared to those of *Panzerarmee*. Thanks to RAF, the enemy was prevented from any form of air observation over the British dispositions between 18 and 22 October, when the 8th Army reached its definitive positions, and for the whole 23 October, just before the attack. It was confirmed by the decoded *Enigma* messages, transmitting the daily reports of *Fliegerführer:* no German airplane managed to fly over the area where the British forces were concentrated"[60].

The worries in Rome and Berlin were concentrated on Malta, on the possible landing of the allies in the Mediterranean and on the provisions for ACIT.

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[59] B. MONTGOMERY, *Da El Alamein al fiume Sangro*, *op. cit.*, p. 24.
[60] F.H. HINSLEY, *op. cit.*, p. 435.

Forecasts regarding British initiatives were approximate. To give an example, Colonel Liss, from the OKW, arrived in Egypt on 21 October and, discussing the situation, sustained that the British offensive would start during the first days of November and not in October. The head of the ACIT information office was convinced to the contrary, that it would happen in a few days, and cited the following indication. The 8th Army, before each offensive, had always requested a serious reinforcement of stretcher bearers and such a communication had been formulated on 15th October. It was known that they needed about 8 days to satisfy the request, and therefore the attack would start on the 23rd.

Liss was not convinced by such evidence and considered his own forecast valid, founded on the information coming to Berlin from various sources, saying that a big Anglo-American operation would start at the beginning of November (an evident reference to the landing in French North Africa)[61].

Among the various indications of the imminent attack, the 8th Army was also keeping radio silence. Actually, this was frequently noticed during October and, particularly, on the 4th and the 14th, and from 9:00 on the 22nd to 17:00 on the 23rd. Such a long radio silence appeared really foreboding. Moreover, precisely on the 23rd, at 11:00 in the morning, the ACIT centre collecting prisoners related the following to the army information office:

> "The 20th Army Corps has sent a prisoner captured in the northern sector. He belongs to the 5th *Cameron Highlanders* (51st Division) (...). According to the prisoner, all the 51st Division has supposedly arrived directly in the Middle East. Moreover, he confirmed that there are rumours about an imminent offensive, circulating among the units"[62].

It is worth taking a look at the morale of the troops, at least the Italian ones. The reviewing of about 70,000 letters executed by the centre of the post censor's office in the first fifteen days of October did not supply any new information compared to the past. Long service in Africa and the uninterrupted succession of months on the front played their role. If the tone of the newly arrived groups was quite lofty, the groups that had been exposed to the war for many years were influenced by the circumstances. However, there was a general certainty of victory, and in some groups, *esprit de corps,* as well as the eagerness to fight, were alive and kicking. The men of the *Folgore*, mentioned in the bulletin of the Supreme Command, had very high morale. Here is an example from one of these letters:

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[61] H.O. BEHRENDT, *op. cit.*, pp. 248-249.

[62] H.O. BEHRENDT, p. 73.

"We were mentioned in the bulletin on the 3rd and 4th (...) we are all twenty-year-old boys, determined to do everything. Until this moment, we have had our losses too, but no one has given up or let the enemy take him prisoner, there are only wounded and dead on the battlefield of honour (...)".

There were not too many references to the military situation, since there had not been many important events in that period, but generally there was certain confidence. Some of the soldiers mentioned signs of weariness from both parties:

"(...) Regarding the war, we don't know when it will be over. We only know that we're a bit tired. They are certainly tired too, but it shouldn't last too long yet".

Some spoke with conviction and hope about peace negotiations taking place: "*(...) Today there is the counsel of the Pope with all the leaders of State in the war. When you write to me, please let me know what they have decided*".

But generally there were pangs of nostalgia and physical and moral tiredness after a certain period of stay in Africa. The discouragement about an acceptable solution to the painful question of leaves spread more and more and was followed by violent resentment about the lack of understanding in Italy of the difficulties and the discomforts caused by the Egyptian front, with an emphasized sense of rebellion and contempt towards those who remained at home and war profiteers.

Among the main reasons for protest and worry was the suppression of benefits for the families in difficult circumstances and the difficulties with food in Italy, and, in part, a persistently inefficient postal service in its various forms. There were very strong complaints about the remittance of money to families:

"It has been a month since I was able to make a postal order due to the lack of forms! It is a real disgrace, if you consider that many of my comrades have families who live on the money they send them! I cannot imagine what serious strategic problem there is to solve to enable Italy to send the forms to simplify procedures! This is one of those unexplainable things that happen these days..."[63].

[63] *Delease* historical diary, f..13810/Secr., 20/10/1942.

ORDER OF BATTLE OF THE ITALO-GERMAN ARMOURED ARMY ON THE 23RD OF OCTOBER 1942

Commander: General George Stumme
Chief of Staff: Colonel Siegfried Westphal

X Army Corps (General Enrico Frattini *ad interim*):

17th *Pavia* Infantry Division (General Nazareno Scattaglia) over:
27th Infantry Regiment over two battalions;
28th Infantry Regiment over two battalions;
26th Artillery Regiment over three groups;
divisional support units, including:
XVIII Combined Engineer Battalion.

27th *Brescia* Infantry Division (General Brunetto Brunetti) over:
19th Infantry Regiment over two battalions;
20th Infantry Regiment over three battalions;
1st *Celere* Artillery Regiment over two groups;
divisional support units, including:
XXVII Combined Engineer Battalion.

185th *Folgore* (Paratrooper) Infantry Division (General Enrico Frattini) over:
186th Infantry Regiment over three battalions;
187th Infantry Regiment over three battalions;
185th Artillery Regiment over two 47/32 groups;
divisional support units, including:
VIII Combat Sappers Battalion.

Corps Combat Support units, including:
9th *Bersaglieri* Regt. over two battalions;
XIX/16th Artillery Regt. with 105/8 guns;
CXLVII/8th Artillery Regt. with 149/28 guns;
XXXI Combat Sappers Battalion;
X Pioneer Engineer Battalion;
X Signal Battalion;
Minor units.
Corps service support units.

XX Army Corps (General Giuseppe De Stefanis) over:
101st *Trieste* Motorized Division (General Francesco La Ferla) over:
65th Infantry Regiment over two battalions;
66th Infantry Regiment over three battalions;
21st Artillery Regiment over three field groups;
divisional support units, including:

VIII *Bersaglieri* Armoured Battalion;
XI Tank Battalion (M13 tanks);
LII Combined Engineer Battalion.
132nd *Ariete* Armoured Division (General Francesco Arena) over:
8th *Bersaglieri* Regiment over three battalions;
132nd Tank Regiment over three battalions;
132nd Artillery Regiment over three towed field groups and two self-propelled artillery;
divisional support units, including:
III "*Nizza*" Armoured Cavalry Battalion
XXXII Combined Engineer Battalion;
XV/15th Artillery Group (105/28 towed howitzers);
XXX Artillery Group (88/55 towed guns);
CCCXXXII Artillery Group. (100/17 towed howitzers);
133rd *Littorio* Armoured Division (General Gervasio Bitossi) over:
12th *Bersaglieri* Regiment over three battalions;
133rd Tank Regiment over three battalions;
3rd *Celere* Artillery Regiment over one towed field artillery group and 2 self-propelled artillery groups;
divisional support units, including:
III "*Novara*" Armoured Cavalry Battalion (L 6 tanks);
XXIX Artillery Group (88/55 towed guns);
CCCXXXII Artillery Group (100/17 towed howitzers);
XXXIII Combined Engineer Battalion;
Corps Combat Support units, including:
XXIV Combined Engineer Battalion

Corps Combat service support units.

XXI Army Corps (General Alessandro Gloria *ad interim*):
25th *Bologna* Infantry Division (General Alessandro Gloria) over:
39th Infantry Regiment over three battalions;
40th Infantry Regiment over three battalions;
205th Artillery Regiment over three groups;
divisional support units, including:
CCCLVII Artillery Group (75/27 towed howitzers)
XXV Combined Engineer Battalion;

102nd *Trento* Infantry Division (General Giorgio Masina) over:
61st Infantry Regiment over three battalions;
62nd Infantry Regiment over three battalions;
46th Artillery Regiment with two field groups, and one Anti-aircraft Group;
divisional support units, including:

CCCLV Artillery Group (77/27 towed howitzers);
CCLIV Artillery Group (77/28 towed howitzers);
IV Grenadiers Anti-tank Battalion;
LI Combined Engineer Battalion

Corps Combat support units, including:
7th *Bersaglieri* Regiment over two battalions;
8th Artillery Regimental Task Force over three groups;
XXXI Combat Sapper Battalion;
LVX Signal Battalion;
XXVII Pioneer Engineer Battalion
Corps Combat service support.

Deutsches Afrikakorps (General Wilhelm von Thoma) over:
15th *Panzerdivision* (General Gustav von Vaerst) over;
8th *Panzerregiment* over two battalions;
115th *Panzergrenadiere* Regiment over three battalions;
33rd Artillery Regiment over three groups;
divisional combat support units, including:
33rd Reconnaissance Group;
33rd *Panzerjaeger* Group;
33rd Pioneer Battalion,
78th Signal Battalion;
33rd Reserve Battalion.

21st *Panzerdivision* (General Heinz von Randow) over:
5th *Panzerregiment* over two battalions;
104th *Panzergrenadiere* Regiment over three battalions;
155th Artillery Regiment over three groups
divisional combat support units, including:
3rd Reconnaissance Group;
39th *Panzerjaeger* Group;
VIII Machinegun Battalion;
200th Pioneer Battalion;
200th Signal Battalion;
200th Reserve Battalion.
90th Light Infantry Division (General Theodor von Sponeck) over:
155th Infantry Regiment over two battalions;
200th Infantry Regiment over two battalions;
361st Infantry Regiment over two battalions;
228th *Panzergrenadiere* Regiment *Afrika*;
190th Artillery Regiment over two groups;
divisional combat support units, including:

580th Reconnaissance Group,
190th *Panzerjaeger* Group;
900th Pioneer Battalion;
900th Signal Battalion;
900th Reserve Battalion.
164th Infantry Division (General Karl Hans Lungershausen) over:
125th *Panzergrenadiere* Regiment over three battalions;
382nd *Panzergrenadiere* Regiment over three battalions;
433rd *Panzergrenadiere* Regiment over three battalions;
220th Artillery Regiment in two groups;
divisional combat support units, including:
220th Reconnaissance Group;
220th Pioneer Battalion.

22nd Paratrooper Brigade (General Hermann Ramcke).

Corps Combat support units, including:
475th Signal Battalion;

Army Combat support units, including:
19th Flak Division (General Burckhardt);
Artillery Headquarters 104;
288th *Panzergrenadiere* Regiment (or Menton Task Group);
580th Reconnaissance Group;
605th *Panzerjaeger* Group;
10th Signal Regiment.
136th *Giovani Fascisti* Armoured Div. (General Ismaele di Nisio) over:
Giovani Fascisti Infantry Regt over two battalions;
136th Artillery Regt over four groups;
IX Independent Infantry Battalion;
III *Monferrato* Armoured Cavalry Battalion.
Army combat service support units.

Another issue was the suppression of the benefits already given to the families of soldiers living in poverty. The measure was applied too generously in the beginning, now it was being revised and this implied a new, heavier psychological problem to be added to the first one.

Regarding censorship, one must say that it deeply hurt the feelings of the masses, not only because it existed, as everyone understood why it was necessary, but rather for the punitive form it was assuming. There were frequent requests from the Central Authority to take disciplinary action towards the soldiers who expressed their discomfort, quite often with good reason. The mail had, therefore, lost its sincerity due to the fear of punish-

ment, and censorship failed in its principle objective of getting a clear idea of the real thoughts and feelings of the masses.

Another cause for a strong irritation was the detailed inspections of the ports and airports in Italy and the rigid application of the customs law and consequent confiscation of even insignificant goods liable to the customs duty. As a result, there was sense of vexation for the wounded who were coming back, or those who were repatriating after two years of war, without benefit to the public.

Despite everything, there was an atmosphere of calm and trust while waiting for an operation whose imminence and impact was well known. Although the outline introduced in the ACIT information office appeared rich and coloured, it is believed that Stumme did not "feel" the offensive to be so close. On the contrary, it is hard to understand how, in a new military sector, he could start a match with Montgomery, without the commanders of the X and XXI Corps, as well as without his own Chief of General Staff (General Gause), who went on leave on 10 October, and also the DAK's (Colonel Bayerlein), whose commander, von Thoma, did not have any war experience in the desert. In the evening of October 23rd, the ACIT war bulletin said: "*Enemy situation unchanged*".

3. The Eve of the 8th Army Battle

When Churchill, in mid-August, asked Alexander about which period it would be possible to resume the initiative, he indicated the end of September as a reliable time. Montgomery, when asked the same question, gave a different answer: "*Not before the first week of October*". Churchill disregarded Montgomery's opinion, as he considered it too far from his own, and returned to London oriented to see the offensive begin in the last days of September, and so in accordance with *Torch* which he hoped to start on 14 October.

There were three strategic aspects to be considered and coordinated: *Torch*, which, given military and political implications and uncertainties in French North Africa, was better to precede with a determined action in Egypt; Malta, whose autonomy with foodstuffs (until the first days in December) and fuel (until November 22nd) forced sending a convoy of provisions and, therefore, seizing the airports of Cirenaica as soon as possible; the offensive of the 8th Army which should have started with the full moon. The full moon was, in fact, thought as a *condicio sine qua non*, considering its breakthrough power. It would then be on September 22nd or

October 24th. Evidently, this last factor conditioned the others. After the battle of Alam el Halfa, Montgomery was convinced that it would be impossible to move in September, just two weeks after Rommel's last attempts had been rejected, and he thus chose 24 October.

Churchill, who on 17 September had urgently requested having some news, considering that *"we had agreed that the attack would take place at the beginning of the fourth week of September"*[64], was not at all satisfied with such a long wait and insisted. Alexander talked with Montgomery once again, and the latter wrote the reasons for his decision on a piece of paper.

1. Rommel's offensive had caused some delays in British preparations.
2. Moon conditions limited D-day to only some periods in September and October.
3. The troops would not be sufficiently equipped and trained in September.
4. If the date were chosen in September the offensive would possibly fail, whereas in October a complete victory was assured.

There was a malicious question implicit in it: should I attack in September? Face to face, Montgomery told Alexander that he would refuse to move before October and that *"if Whitehall ordered to attack in September, they would be forced to find somebody else to do it"*[65].

Alexander shared the idea of waiting for another few weeks and answered Churchill calmly, expressing the terms of the problem and explaining why it would be necessary to postpone the operation till October 23rd and, therefore, thirteen days before *Torch*, which, for the time being, had been scheduled for the 4th of November. The Prime Minister had to make the best of things, also because Brooke backed Alexander and *Torch* had definitively been scheduled for 8 November, but he underlined that the responsibility for making the decision was in the hands of the Commander in Chief in the Middle East:

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[64] W. CHURCHILL, *op. cit.*, p. 208. After the battle of Alam el Halfa, General Brooke wrote in his diary: *"My new worry is now to restrain Wilson from bothering Alexander and Montgomery and from inciting them to attack before they are ready. Such a horrible eagerness (...) is a real disease"* (A. BRYANT, *op. cit.*, p. 462).

[65] B. MONTGOMERY, *Memoires*, *op. cit.*, p. 117. Montgomery added gratified: *"My bonds increased after Alam Half! We heard nothing more about an attack in September!"*.

"We are in your hands; obviously, if the battle is successful, the long delay will be justified. Whatever happens, we will support you and our thoughts will be with you.
I would like to recall your attention to the possibility that the enemy may take advantage of this period to prepare field fortifications. Instead of a slim veil of cover through which you could open a corridor at night, couldn't it be that you find a system of fortifications, forty kilometres deep, with obstructions, artillery emplacements and machine gun nests? The tank was first invented to pave the way for the infantry under the fire of machine guns; it is now the infantry that will have to pave the way for the tanks and I think that it is going to be a difficult task, considering that firepower has sensibly increased.
You have certainly thought about all of it and about the way to extend your front of attack to make the enemy feel you superiority in numbers"[66].

The preparation work was really impressive from every aspect. Montgomery proposed, at first, to confer an indestructible solidity to the positions kept by the 8th Army, in order not to compromise the organisational phase, have a suitable base to start the offensive from and recollect the units in case of partial failure (a total failure was excluded).

All the static structures had, therefore, been reinforced and, in the southern sector, three new minefields were laid to replace the ones in ACIT hands. One of these (*Nuts*) went from Deir el Muhafid in the south-east up to Deir el Ragil; the second one (*June*) started at Deir el Ragil and went down for 6 or 7 kilometres southwards; the third one (*May*) extended east of Deir el Ragil, more or less parallel to *June*, crossing Samaket Gaballa.

Another objective was to prepare the 8th Army. On a general level, it was not only a problem of arranging the numerous units that had arrived recently or that were about to arrive, but of improving the cooperation between the units within the army corps, which had been significantly modified.

The 30th Corps, now entrusted to General Leese, replacing General Ramsden, included the old divisions, 9th Australian and 1st South African, among which the new 51st *Highlanders* Infantry Division and the 2nd New Zealand had been inserted, the latter from the 13th Corps. All the four divisions were concentrated in the Tell el Eisa salient. In the south, in the Ruweisat sector, there was the 4th Indian Infantry Division, which had

[66] W. CHURCHILL, *op. cit.*, p. 209.

replaced the 5th[67]. The 23rd Armoured Brigade, equipped with *Valentines*, was placed directly under the army corps. One of its regiments constituted a reserve, while the three remaining supported the Australian, the Scottish and the South African Divisions entrusted with the breakthrough. The New Zealanders had, moreover, an entire armoured brigade.

The 13th Corps drew up the 50th Infantry Division in the Alam Nayl sector, the 44th in Deir el Munassib and the 7th Armoured Division further south, up to Qaret el Himeimat.

There had been many changes made in brigades and minor units, especially in the armoured and motorized units. And so, the 2nd New Zealand Infantry Division had received the 9th Armoured Brigade, replacing the 4th Infantry Brigade, which had been sent to the rear area to be transformed into an armoured unit. The 50th Infantry Division had been completed with the 1st Greek Brigade and the 2nd French, but the 44th had lost its 113th which passed to the 10th Armoured Division to be motorized. The 7th Armoured Division, which had been deprived of its motorized infantry, was assigned to the 1st French Brigade.

Montgomery's precise intention, since the beginning, had been to assemble an armoured corps, similar to the ACIT one. The 10th Corps, entrusted to General Lumsden, was then made up of the 1st, 10th and 8th Armoured Divisions. The 1st Armoured Division had the 2nd Armoured Brigade and the 7th Motor Brigade at its disposal, which already belonged to the 7th Armoured Division. The 10th had two armoured brigades: the 8th and the 24th, and one motorized, the 133rd, which had previously been assigned to the 44th Infantry Division. The 8th Armoured Division could not enter the frame of the forces, as it only had the headquarters and a few divisional units left. As it was impossible to find a motorized brigade to reinforce its strength, the 24th Armoured Brigade was detached to the 10th Armoured Division.

Naturally, to reach an acceptable level of amalgamation, the commanders had to work hard, taking advantage of the operational break. But there was an urgent necessity for a particular kind of preparation: one that would allow passage beyond the minefields in front of ACIT positions. They were different from the deep minefields of the Russian front, but they represented anyway an obstacle that could not be ignored and, however, it was something of a novelty for the African theatre of operations. Then there was the

[67] In fact, the replacement only concerned the Headquarters of the 4th Indian Inf. Div. with the 5th and of the 9th Indian Brigade with the 7th. All other units remained the same: 5th and 161st Indian Brigade, artillery, engineers and services.

tactical problem, consisting in the following sequence: opening corridors, broadening them, passage of the infantry, passage of the armoured vehicles, and passage of trucks. The estimated time to complete the operation was about 10 hours, during the night. The technical problem was dealt with by organizing a series of courses, attended in shifts by all engineer units. Previously, it was truly thought to have found a solution by mechanical means. In Great Britain, tank designers had been studying for one year how to adapt an infantry vehicle into a de-mining vehicle, which, moving slowly, would hammer the earth in front of it with a system of chains and make the mines explode. In Egypt, they tried to gain time preparing something similar. The Engineer Headquarters of the army modified a *Mathilda*, by applying chains similar to flails to it. Considering the good result of the experiments with a prototype, named *Scorpion*, 24 examples were made.

However, when an attempt was made to employ the device to achieve a broad breach through a given line, it became evident that the dust raised by the flails overheated the engine and, blinding the driver, made it difficult to keep the direction straight. In the end, both Leese from the 30th Corps and Lumsden from the 10th gave up the idea of using *Scorpions* and returned to manual de-mining and detection of the explosive devices using the new Polish mine detectors or even the old method of the bayonet[68]. The 8th Army assigned 202 devices to the 30th Corps, 117 to the 13th and 180 to the 10th. It is chilling to think that, during the battle of Alam el Halfa, the DAK and the XX Corps began the large envelopment with just twenty mine detectors! As for the *Scorpions*, they were used by 7th Armoured Division as well as possible.

Training activities were organised by relieving in turns from the front line the brigades tasked with the breakthrough action and sending them to the nearest area behind the front for one week, in order to allow the soldiers a short period of rest. That is also why Alexander wrote:

> "Thanks to the perfect functioning of our health service, the number of our sick soldiers did not exceed the normal level, relative to that time of the year, and, anyway, it never reached the disastrous proportions experienced by the enemy troops"[69].

The instruction of the units, conducted with a lot of realism, focused on the night progression through mined areas, with the infantry proceed-

[68] The time necessary to open the corridor with the mine-detector was about 100m/h; with the bayonet it was twice as long and it was necessary to work during the day or by the light of the moon.

[69] H. ALEXANDER, *D'El Alamein*, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

ing behind the mobile barrage of artillery fire. Once the bridgeheads had been established over the mined area, the armoured units would cross the security zone, passing through corridors marked with white ribbon (more than 150 kilometres of ribbon was distributed, mostly to the 30th Corps) and illuminated by special two-colour lanterns (a total of 89,000). A combined mine clearance group was constituted in each division. The one that was set up by the 1st Armoured Division was taken as a model by other units and was based on one infantry battalion, three tank platoons, an engineer unit, a military police and a signal unit. When the three corridors would be opened, and the armoured divisions would be enabled to pass through, the military police would control the traffic in both directions. Within the 7th Armoured Division, the engineers were supported by the 44th Reconnaissance Regiment on *Bren-carriers*. A simple trail of diesel turned out to be a useful expedient; it was left by the lead vehicle and was quite visible under the moon light.

The new combat vehicles played an important role in the reorganization of the army. The most precious was the American 35-ton *Sherman* tank, equipped with a 75 calibre gun, able to face the German *Panzer* Type IV Special. The armoured divisions had already 252 of them in line and more were on their way. Moreover, the 20-ton *Crusader* Mk III, equipped with a 57 calibre gun, was sent from Britain.

There was a significant increase in anti-tank weapons in the artilleries. Each infantry battalion had eight 2-pounder guns available; every motorised infantry battalion received sixteen 6-pounder guns; each anti-tank artillery regiment had 64 6-pounder guns if attached to an armoured division, or 48 6-pounder and 16 2-pounder guns if assigned to an infantry division. The result of this was an enormous anti-tank stopping power for the whole army.

But the main improvements regarded armoured artillery. The United States sent a certain number of *Priests*, a 105 calibre self-propelled howitzer fitted on a *Grant* chassis, and assigned to the 11th Horse Mounted Artillery. From Britain, instead, some experimental samples of the *Bishop* had been sent, a 25-pounder piece on a *Valentine* frame, and the *Deacon*, a 6-pounder anti-tank device on a light tank frame; but these prototypes were abandoned soon afterwards.

Finally, supplies: the last thing that could be done without. Four large logistic centres were working on behalf of the army: the Field Maintenance Centres no. 102 at El Hammam and no. 202 south of El Imayid, in the 30th Corps sector; no. 96 and 97, much further south than the previous ones, in the 13th Corps sector. There were 5 days of supplies

piled up in their depots, and another two were on wheels. The units were supplied by a water pipeline. The level of divisional provisions had been upgraded to 7 days of food, ammunition, water, fuel and spare parts; moreover, each vehicle had three days worth of food and water for the crew and fuel for 300 miles on board. While there were 18,000 tons of ammunition in the logistic centres, each division could rely on 268,000 shells for the 25-pounder howitzers and 20,000 medium calibre rounds.

During the twelve days of the battle, therefore, the British artillery could fire more than one million grenades. Just to make a comparison, it is interesting to remember that Stumme was forced to order the Italo-German artilleries not to react to the opponent's preparation fire in order to save ammunition, when the development of the battle was in view.

The engineer units included, among other things, 25 pioneer companies in line, and 24 more as reserve; the transportation units could rely on about thirty companies equipped with 3 and 10 ton trucks; six companies for tank transportation, one with water tank trucks, one of tankers and 6 more companies for transportation kept as reserve[70].

An innovation of great value on an organisational level was the establishment of the *Corps of Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers* (REME) on the 1 October, whose units were in charge of repairing artillery, vehicles, radio sets and other materials. Together with REME, there was also an American workshop unit. A special measure was taken to supply the armoured vehicles. A tank reorganisation group, put into operation within the 1st Tank Brigade, collected spare tanks from all the bases, checked them, completed their equipment and crews and sent them to the *Tank Delivery Regiment*, which posted them to their destinations.

On 14 September, in Cairo, the situation of ACIT had been studied attentively. It dealt with evaluating the chances of an Italo-German retreat. The conclusion was that Rommel would probably never abandon the El Alamein positions. For a static defence, there were no more economical lines and, more importantly, an eventual retreat would allow the *Royal Air Force* to transfer to the more advanced airports, and would thus create an extremely difficult situation for the use of the port of Tobruk. Moreover, the supplies disembarked in Tripoli and also in Bengasi led to heavy consumption to reach the front. Therefore, the accumulation of reserves and supplies for an acceptable autonomy would require several weeks, creating a priority for extra equipment rather than new divisions. A few days

[70] Between the 1st of August and the 23rd of October, the 8th Army received more than 10,000 motor vehicles for the logistic services.

before, it was learned, from the *Enigma* reports, that, due to changes in the situation in the eastern Mediterranean, Hitler had ordered an immediate reinforcement of the stronghold in Crete and the 22nd Infantry Division, required by Rommel, would be used instead to this end.

As for the possibility of the Axis resuming the offensive, according to the messages usually decoded by *Enigma*, on 6 September ACIT could only count on 23 days worth of food, 14 of ammunition and 8 of fuel (on normal consumption) and the aggravating point was the uncertainty of sea communications. It was taken for granted that troops and vehicles would arrive as reinforcement, but it was calculated that the growth of the armoured forces would not exceed 20-25 tanks a week and the number of airplanes (presumably, fighters) would not be worrying at all. Considering the situation, it was not realistic to think of any ACIT initiative before November. Moreover, it was to be considered that, in case of a German attack from the Caucasus into Turkey and a consequent detraction of the forces from the 8th Army to face the new danger or, even worse, the retreat of the 8th Army, Rommel would not even hesitate to start his offensive in October. On 9 September, General Wilson, commander in chief of the Persia-Iraq sector, asked London for the authorisation to take steps in case of such an eventuality, and those steps also concerned the transfer of many units from the 8th Army.

In a breakthrough battle, defining the location where to open the breach is connected with the principle of assaulting the weakest sector of the enemy defensive line or carrying out the effort along the line of highest performance, even if it involves attacking a more robust sector. Alexander and Montgomery performed a reconnaissance all over the front, weighing various operational hypotheses. There were essentially two solutions: breaking through in the south, where Axis forces seemed less solid, which would be a variation to the classic desert warfare strategy, consisting in a winding manoeuvre around the internal flank, or in the north, where ACIT was better arranged, but where the results of a battle would be more immediate and tangible. Montgomery proposed a main effort to the north and a secondary one to the south, and Alexander accepted and appreciated the potential of that plan.

> "On the other hand", he observed, "it was the easiest thing to do, because our connections would be shorter and would use easier routes. Finally, and that is even more important, a penetration northwards, following the coast way, would cut the enemy's bases, immediately pushing all of his forces south of the breach risking isolation, and threatening the withdrawal fields and the supply centre of El Daba.

> The enemy front could be compared to a door with hinges to the north: a push to the south, directed against the free side of the shutter, could push him back before we would be able to obtain serious results. But a violent blow against the hinges would disarray the whole front and force the door wide open"[71].

Once he received the approval of the head commander, Montgomery turned back to carefully examine the area and determined the exact point where the maximum pressure was to be applied; the stretch between Tell el Eisa and the El Miteiriya ridge. On 15 September, he met the corps commanders and illustrated the features of Operation *Lightfoot*, the conventional name given to the offensive (Sketch N. 36). The 30th Corps had to create two wide passages, north and south of El Wishka, through which the 10th Corps would pass and occupy *"a territory of its choice astride the enemy supply lines"*. Such a move would certainly lead the 15th *Panzer* and the *Littorio* to intervene. Once they had met the 10th Corps, already well settled, they would easily be destroyed considering that they would be fighting with notably inferior equipment. In the southern sector, the 13th Corps would have sufficient forces to let the 7th Armoured Division hold and block the 21st *Panzer* and the *Ariete*.

Montgomery discussed some points extensively: the 30th Corps had to "work" for the 10th Corps, in order to make it easier for them to cross the mine fields and find a way out in the open; the 10th Corps, in turn, had to be ready at daybreak of D-day, but was not supposed to get involved in the first clashes. Then it would turn slightly toward north-west until it reached the Rahman Track (known by us as the "*Ariete* Track").

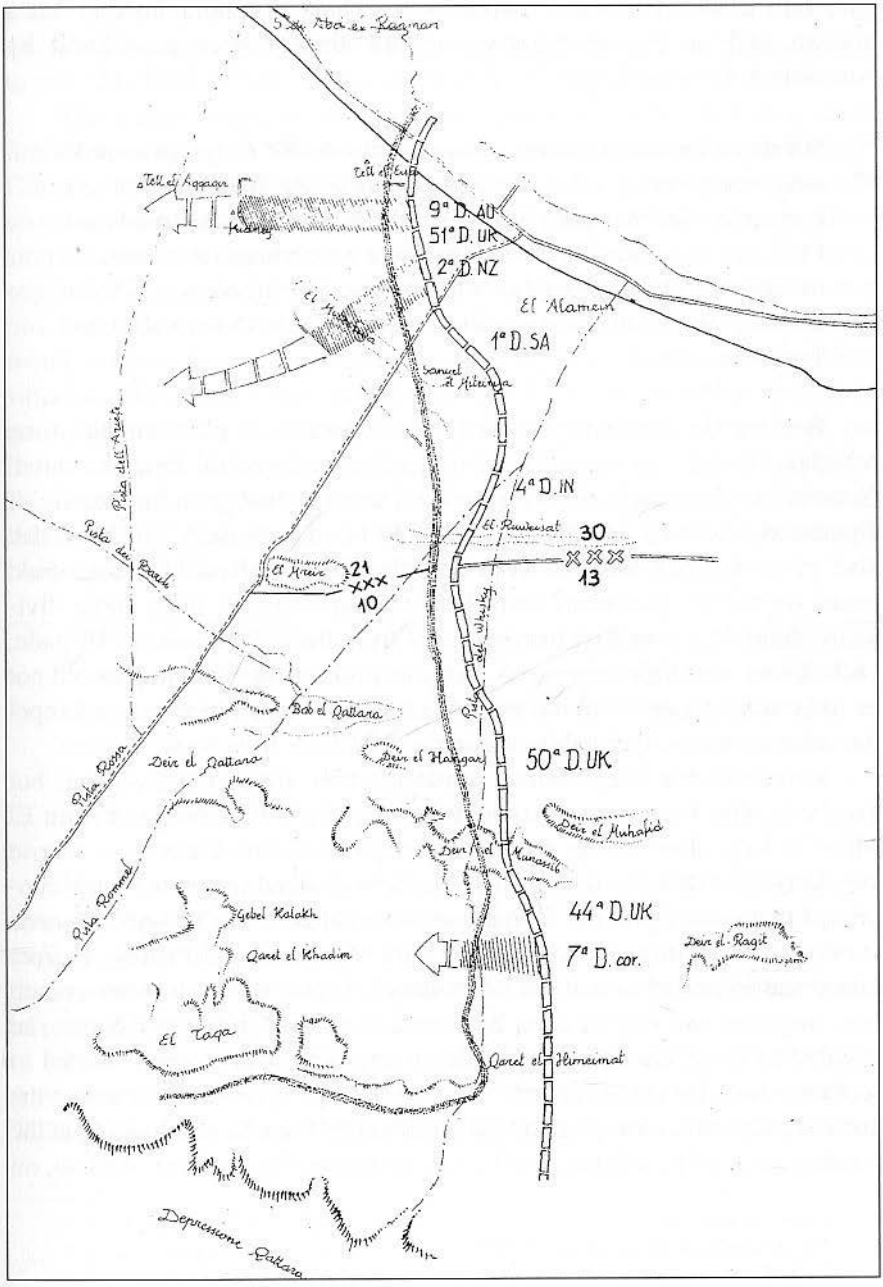
Naturally, were the 15th *Panzer* and the *Littorio* not sent to counterattack, the 10th Corps would take the initiative and destroy them. In essence, the annihilation of the northern Italo-German armoured mass was the main effort of the operation. The breakdown of the infantry and of the rest of the front would just be a consequence and would not be difficult.

Nothing was told to the divisions about this plan, except some necessary details to direct the training activity and the preparation of the army.

Later on, Montgomery explained he deliberately wanted to avoid repeating a manoeuvre used by every commander in the desert, but it is clear that the El Alamein gap did not allow the implementation of an encircling manoeuvre on the outside of the southern wing of the enemy. Rommel, too, was forced to break through, even though by moving against

[71] H. ALEXANDER, *op. cit.*, pp. 43-44.

Sketch N. 36
"THE INITIAL MANOEUVRE PLAN
FOR 'LIGHTFOOT' (15 SEPTEMBER)



the weakest part of the British formation. Montgomery's situation was different in that, in order to overwhelm the static defence, he could play "hitting hard on the strongest point", unlike Rommel, who was forced to "hit hard on the weakest point". Moreover, it should be remembered that a breakthrough in the northern sector had already been considered by Auchinleck since 30 July:

> "I ordered General Ramsden, commander of the 30th Corps, to immediately start planning a decisive attack south of the Tell el Eisa salient, keeping in mind the possibility of a quick advance along the costal road. I believed this operation could offer more possibilities for success. At the same time I told General Gott to continue studying the possibility of breaking through the enemy defence in proximity to Gebel Kalakh and Taqa Plateau"[72].

Besides the announced novelty, the operational plan and the time schedule caused "the commanders of the Commonwealth" to take a stand. General Freyberg had been working hard since he had got a full picture of Operation *Lightfoot*. He trusted he would be able to carry out his tasks, also given the fact that, as we know, the New Zealand Division could count on the 9th Armoured Brigade. Unfortunately, the other three divisions could only count on one regiment from the 23rd Armoured Brigade, each. There was, therefore, a risk, not a negligible one, that they would not be able to penetrate up to the respective objective, dig trenches and repel the counterattacks, inevitably causing a disastrous flow back.

It is true that there were Lumsden's two armoured divisions, but Freyberg, who kept in mind some precedents from Ruweisat and from El Mreir in July, after having discussed the question with Gatehouse, whose 10th Armoured Division had to cross the New Zealand sector, was now convinced that once again the British tanks would be more inclined towards caution than determination. Together with Morshead and Pienaar, he met Leese and informed him about his doubts[73]. Leese, who was a newcomer, was surprised and embarrassed by such a conversation but, to be sure, he decided to speak about it with Montgomery. And Montgomery started to feel uncertain. He asked himself: would his *corps d'élite*, that is to say the 10th Corps, be able to implement his intentions? When he was looking at the training level of its subunits, he had to answer in the negative. And so, on

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[72] C. AUCHINLECK, *Despatch, cit.*, p. 367.

[73] Cfr. R. WALKER, *Alam Halfa and El Alamein*, Wellington, 1967, pp. 211-212.

6 October he abruptly decided to change his plans. Four days before, London announced that the Germans were not making any progress in Russia and that *"a massive threat against Persia and Iraq before spring 1943 is highly improbable"*[74]. And *Ultra,* the trusty friend decoding *Enigma* messages, made it known that on 30 September the DAK was able to put 224 efficient tanks in line and the XX Corps another 270.

The change made to the plan was significant, although it may seem limited to only a few aspects at a glance. Instead of transferring the 10th Corps to the enemy supply line and destroying the Italo-German tanks as soon as possible (main task), it was decided to annihilate the infantry divisions deployed in the resistance position (and the infantry of the 8th Army, supported by powerful artillery, were absolutely able to perform such a task). Even in this case, the enemy would not just stand still, but instead would employ their armoured divisions to restore a locally compromised situation. But its divisions would meet the British ones, which instead of going forward as was initially planned, would stop right beyond the breaches and thus avoid any interference with the task of destroying the ACIT strongholds (Sketch N. 37). The experience at Alam El Halfa led to the hope that British tanks, anti-tank guns and artillery might have a chance of wearing down the enemy's armoured formations.

> "The success of the entire operation", wrote Montgomery, "depended largely on the possibility for the 30th Corps to carry out a breakthrough and create corridors, letting the divisions of the 10th Corps pass through them. I was sure that, if we had the chance to bring the armoured brigades through the corridors without much delay, we would have the battle won"[75].

It was then necessary for Lumsden's divisions to enter the passages immediately after the infantry and before *"I came to know that the passages were open"*[76]. If in the morning of 24 October, that is to say on D+1, the corridors turned out to be impassable, the armoured divisions would have to find the way on their own.

In substance, the 30th Corps would attack with its four divisions (9th Australian, 51st Scottish, 2nd New Zealand and 1st South African) south of Tell el Eisa, over a front of about 7 kilometres, to reach the height of the

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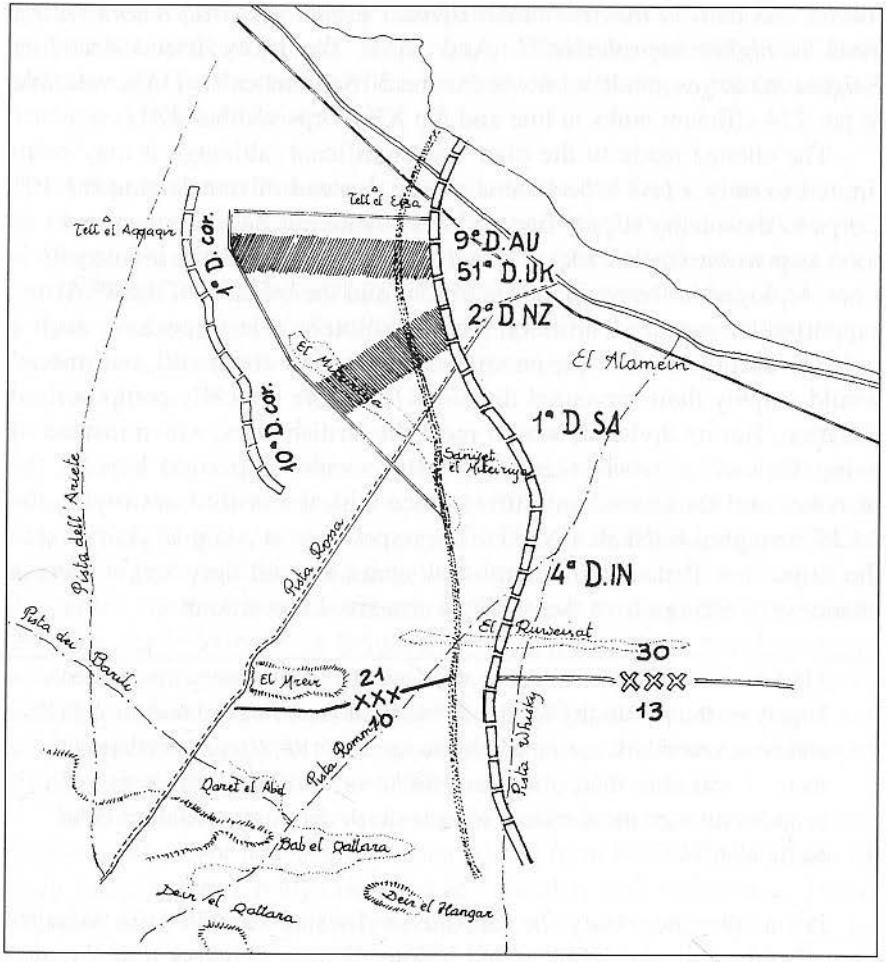
[74] F.H. HINSLEY, *op. cit.*, p. 430.
[75] B. MONTGOMERY, *Memoirs, cit.*, p. 120.
[76] *Ibid.*

Sketch N. 37
"THE DEFINITIVE MANOEUVRE PLAN FOR 'LIGHTFOOT'"



Kidney-Miteiriya alignment included, that is to say, immediately behind the strongholds. The attack front was reduced to prevent the 9th Australian from crashing against particularly hard positions across the coastal way. This variation, according to General de Guingand, was also based on two considerations: firstly, that most of the static defence was garrisoned by the Italians *"kept in place by a sandwich with German troops;"* secondly, that the German 164th Infantry Division and the 90th Light were detached deep in the coastal sector, obviously of vital importance[77]. The ACIT

[77] F. DE GUINGAND, *op. cit.*, p. 195.

device was slightly different and the *sandwich*, as we know, went down to battalion level.

For the 13th Corps, the plan remained almost the same: attack in the direction of Gebel Kalakh with the 44th Infantry Division and the 7th Armoured Division to draw the attention of the 21st *Panzer* and the *Ariete* and bar their rush up north. A special action had to be conducted to occupy Qaret el Himeimat and the Taqa Plateau. If the 7th Armoured found a weak resistance, it would then go north-eastwards to the objective of El Daba, where a simulated landing was planned. If it found strong opposition, and if there were many losses, it was not to insist.

The part entrusted to the *Royal Air Force* may be defined conclusive, considering its absolute supremacy. There was no need to indicate the conquest of the sky as the first objective of the battle; the supremacy had already taken place. And so, until 23 October, RAF had to hammer the area deeply behind ACIT, especially all the airports near the border and in Cirenaica.

ORDER OF BATTLE OF THE 8TH ARMY
ON THE DATE OF 23 OCTOBER 1942

Commander: General Bernard L. Montgomery
Chief of Staff: General Francis de Guingand

10th Army Corps (General Herbert Lumsden) over:

1st Armoured Division (General Raymond Briggs) over:
- 2nd Armoured Brigade over three tank battalions and one motorized battalion;
- 7th Motorized Infantry Brigade over three motorized battalions
  divisional combat support units, including:
  12th Armoured Car Lancers Regiment
  2nd, 4th and 11th Horse Mounted Artillery Regiment
  78th Field Artillery Regiment
  76th Anti-tank Artillery Regiment
  42nd Light Anti-aircraft Artillery Regiment.

10th Armoured Division (General Alec H. Gatehouse) over:
8th Armoured Brigade over three tank battalions and one motorized
24th Armoured Brigade over three tank battalions and one motorized
- 133rd Infantry Motorized Brigade over three motorized battalions
  divisional combat support units, including:
  1st *Royal Dragoons* (Armoured Car) Regiment
  1st, 5th, 104th Horse Mounted Artillery Regiment
  98th Field Artillery Regiment

84th Anti-tank Artillery Regiment
53rd Light Anti-aircraft Regiment

8th Armoured Div. (General C.H Gairdner) with few combat support units, Army corps combat service support units.

13th Army Corps (General Brian G. Horrocks) over:

7th Armoured Div. (General John Harding) over:
4th Light Armoured Brigade over two tank battalions and one motorized infantry battalion;
22nd Armoured Brigade over three tank battalions and one motorized infantry battalion;
1st French Infantry Brigade over three infantry battalions and two field artillery regiments.
divisional combat support units, including:
Household Cavalry Regiment (armoured car)
11th *Hussars* Regiment (armoured car)
2nd *Derbyshire Yeomanry* Regiment (armoured car)
3rd Horse Mounted Artillery Regiment;
4th and 97th Field Artillery Regiment
65th Anti-tank Artillery Regiment
15th Light Anti-aircraft Artillery Regiment

44th Infantry Div. (General I.T.P Hughes) over
131st Infantry Brigade over three infantry battalions
132nd Infantry Brigade over three infantry battalions
divisional combat support units, including:
6th *Cheshire* Regiment (machine gunners)
53rd, 57th, 58th, 65th Field Artillery Regiments
57th Anti-tank Artillery Regiment
30th Anti-aircraft Light Regiment

50th Infantry Division (General John S. Nichols) over:
69th Infantry Brigade over three infantry battalions
151st Infantry Brigade over three light infantry battalions
1st Greek Infantry Brigade over three infantry battalions and one field artillery regiment
2nd French Infantry Brigade over two infantry battalions and one artillery battery
divisional combat support units, including:
74th, 111st, 124th, 154th Field Artillery Regiment
102nd Anti-tank Artillery Regiment
34th Light Anti-tank Artillery Regiment
Army corps combat service support units

30th Army Corps (General Oliver Leese):
51st Scottish Infantry Div. (General D.N. Wimberley) over:
125th Infantry Brigade over three infantry battalions;
153rd Infantry Brigade over three infantry battalions;
154th Infantry Brigade over three infantry battalions.
divisional combat support units, including:
126th, 127th and 128th Field Artillery Regiment
61st Anti-tank Artillery Regiment
40th Anti-Aircraft Light Artillery Regiment
51st Reconnaissance Regiment

2nd New Zealand Infantry Division (General Bernard C. Freyberg) over:
5th Infantry Brigade over four infantry battalions (NZ)
6th Infantry Brigade over three infantry battalions (NZ)
9th Armoured Brigade over three tank battalions and one motorized battalion (UK)
divisional units, including:
4th, 5th, 6th Field Artillery Regiment
7th Anti-tank Artillery Regiment
14th Light Anti-aircraft Artillery
2nd Cavalry Regiment (light tanks)

4th Indian Infantry Division (General F.I.S Tuker) over:
5th Infantry Brigade over three infantry battalion
7th Infantry Brigade over three infantry battalions
161st Infantry Brigade over three infantry battalions
divisional combat support units, including:
1st, 11th and 32nd Field Artillery Regiment
149th Anti-tank Artillery Regiment
57th Anti-aircraft Light Artillery Regiment

9th Australian Infantry Division (General Leslie Morshead) over:
20th Infantry Brigade over three infantry battalions
24th Infantry Brigade over three infantry battalions
26th Infantry Brigade over three infantry battalions
divisional combat support units, including:
7th, 8th, 12th Field Artillery Regiment
3rd Anti-tank Artillery Regiment
4th Anti-tank Light Artillery Regiment

1st South African Infantry Division (General Daniel H. Pienaar) over:
1st Infantry Brigade over three infantry battalions
2nd Infantry Brigade over three infantry battalions
3rd Infantry Brigade over three infantry battalions
divisional combat support units, including:

1st, 4th and 7th Field Artillery Regiment
1st Anti-tank Artillery Regiment
1st Anti-aircraft Light Artillery Regiment
2nd *Botha* Infantry Regiment
President Steyn Regiment
3rd Armoured Car Regiment
8th Tank Regiment

Army corps combat support units, including:
23rd Armoured Regiment over four tank battalions (*)
121st Field Artillery Regiment
7th, 64th and 69th Heavy Field Artillery Regiment
Army corps combat service support units
Army support troops, including:
1st Armoured Brigade (General B.N. Todd) non operative
2nd Anti-aircraft Brigade over one Light Anti Aircraft Artillery and one heavy anti-aircraft artillery regiments entrusted with the defence of Army Headquarters and Railway lines
12th Anti-aircraft Brigade over three light anti-aircraft and two heavy anti-aircraft regiments
25th Indian Infantry Brigade for the defence of Army Headquarters and various installations.

(*) Of the four battalions, three were assigned as reinforcements to the infantry divisions: the 40th *Royal Tanks* to the Australian Division, the 50th to the *Highlanders* Division and the 8th to the South African Division.

ORGANISATION OF THE BRITISH INFANTRY DIVISION 1941

Division Headquarters
Three infantry brigades over:

Brigade Headquarters:
Three infantry battalions

Divisional Artillery Headquarters with:
Three Field Artillery Regiments (with 25-pounder howitzers)
One anti-tank regiment (with 6-pounder guns)
One anti-aircraft regiment (with 40mm guns)

Divisional Engineer Headquarters with:
Three engineer companies
One field park company

Divisional combat support units:
One machine gunners battalion
One reconnaissance battalion

Divisional combat service support units

But the real preparation for the ground battle began on the 18th. At zero hour on the 23rd all the bombers would pour over the Italo-German artilleries.

Just on 6 October, Montgomery issued an order relative to the action of command:

> "This battle will bring long, hard combat. Our troops must not think that, since we have good tanks and powerful artillery support, the enemy is going to give up. The enemy will never surrender and there will be harsh clashes.
> The infantry must be prepared to fight and kill and to do it for a long time.
> It is essential to make all the officers understand that a resolute action command is of vital importance in this as (after all) in every battle. There were too many unwounded prisoners captured (by the enemy) in this war. We must imprint in our officers', non-commissioned officers' and soldiers' minds that, when they are cut off and surrounded, and when it seems there is no hope of saving their lives, they must organise to make a stronghold right where they are. In this way they will increase the difficulties for the enemy tremendously, will witness the development of our operations and will prevent themselves from passing the rest of the war in a prisoner camp.
> Nothing is without hope as long as the troops have a steady heart, ammunition and weapons.
> These points must be *immediately* understood by all the officers and soldiers, as they are true for all the combatants"[78].

The organization of the new plan started immediately, but one should not think that there was full agreement on it. It was now Lumsden and his subordinate commanders' turn to have doubts. For them, it was one thing to find the corridor opened by the 30th Corps and comfortably flow to the other side of the strongholds and draw up on the ground of their choice to wait for the enemy, another to have to do it on their own in the middle of minefields in the probable case that the 30th Corps could not make it through, and face the tanks of the Axis in uncertain conditions.

The same commanders of the *Dominions* divisions explicitly expressed many doubts to Leese about the possibility of the 10th Corps overcoming the enemy resistance in a short time, if the infantry units were

[78] B. MONTGOMERY, *Memoirs*, *cit.*, p. 124.

not able to make it. The armoured divisions were at risk of being shattered, which would definitely have a negative impact on the infantrymen. In their opinion, all things considered, it would be preferable to renew the attacks with the infantry and use the 10th corps only as *extrema ratio*. This would be much better, they deemed, than finding themselves in a trap and abandoned by the British tanks, as it had already happened before.

Leese talked about it with Montgomery, who harshly confirmed: the 10th Corps *had* to pass through the 30th Corps at dawn of D+1! The imperative *"was not welcomed by the armoured units"*, Montgomery commented later on, *"but I was determined to make them carry it out to the letter"*[79].

To confer the indispensable secrecy to *Lightfoot*, a complex deception plan was studied and executed (Operation *Bertram*) at corps level. It could be taken for granted that ACIT would naturally expect the imminent offensive of the 8th Army, but one could try to surprise them with the date and with the sector to attack. It was important to divert the air reconnaissance and the Italo-German interception centres and to avoid any indiscretions or, even worse, leakage of information. To reduce the danger of air photography, there was a considerable use of camouflage and concealment. It was important to camouflage the concentration of troops and materials in the 30th Corps sector, to conceal the transfer of the 10th Corps from of *Wadi el Natrun* area, where it was training, to the assembly area southeast of El Alamein, and lead the enemy to believe they were making preparations for the attack in the 13th Corps sector.

So the departure bases of the 30th Corps were prepared and camouflaged carefully; they would only be occupied on D-day. The existing depots were gradually enlarged; others were improvised with dummy materials, to be replaced gradually by real supplies, in order to give the impression of a static situation. 3,000 tons of ammunition was stored close to the El Imayid station; 400 tons of logistic materials, 600 tons of miscellaneous materials and 2,000 of fuel were accumulated in the El Alamein zone. Similar measures were taken in the 13th Corps sector and the 8-inch aqueduct coming from Alexandria was left visible, another 10-inch aqueduct was built and buried at night; one dummy aqueduct was visibly being built southwards and the pace of the works in progress was such as to make one believe it would be completed by the first days of November.

As for the 10th Corps, the last stretches of the track under construction had been postponed to the last minute. Naturally, many more measures were necessary and a more cunning stratagem was devised. The majority of

[79] *Ibid.*, p. 127.

the vehicles, mostly New Zealand and Scottish, were gathered in the assembly area. The total amount was more or less equal to the entire mass of the vehicles of the army corps. When the armoured divisions finished exercises in Wadi el Natrun, and moved to their definite area, the New Zealand and Scottish vehicles went back to their respective divisions and a huge number of fake vehicles were detached to the abandoned training area.

The most apparent part of the radio deception had been entrusted to the signal units of the 8th Armoured Division, left with no brigades; it continued to operate in the area of Wadi el Natrun and its task was to make the 10th Corps departure unobserved.

The secret was then protected by extremely severe measures to prevent enemy agents from gathering any useful information. The few people who knew the details were not allowed to move away from the location of the army, which could not be accessed without a specific authorisation anyway. Leaves were not suspended but only granted to those who were not supposed to take part in the battle (obviously, this direction was an absolute secret too). Patrol activities were only reserved to personnel from the divisions on the front line, which excluded personnel who had temporarily relieved the front line brigades to allow them to conduct their training activities; nobody was allowed to circulate with topographic maps.

Always for secrecy purposes, the issuing of orders became gradual. On 28 September it was the brigade and engineer commanders' turn; on 10 October the turn of the regiment and battalion commanders; on the 17th the plan was disclosed to the commanders of company-battery level units and, on the 21st, to all other officers and troops. From then on, nobody could leave the desert for any reason.

The decoded messages from *Enigma* had been supplying the ACIT's battle plan since the end of September and on 13 October an accurate description of the Italo-German armoured vehicles and anti-tank weapons was issued to all the divisions. The reconstruction of the Axis dispositions was largely acceptable, despite some mistakes and doubts. The only real question regarded the course of action chosen by Rommel and Stumme to conduct the defensive battle. It was not even known where Stumme expected the main assault. Despite the interception of the communication of 20 October, saying that Stumme felt that the most violent effort would possibly be directed towards the northern part of the southern sector, that is to say parallel to Bab el Qattara, they were not very convinced that this was what the enemy was really thinking.

The last information gathered by Montgomery could be summed up in just a few figures. According to the calculation of the intelligence serv-

ice, enemy forces consisted of 238 *Panzer* tanks (30 of which of IV Special Type, 86 of III Special and 30 of II Special Type, that is to say light). In addition, there were 279 medium Italian tanks. Moreover, it was confirmed that no new type of heavy tank had ever reached Africa: ten *Tigers*, the Pkzw VI known about since the end of May, would arrive in November and ten more in December. ACIT had 517 tanks versus the 1,029 of the 8th Army, 200 of which were for immediate backup, plus another 1,000 that were being repaired or modified in the workshops. Against the 30 fearsome *Pkzw IV Special*, the 8th Army could set 500 *Grants* and *Shermans*, the analogous American tanks.

A few days before the battle, Montgomery decided to talk to the commanders of all ranks, up to lieutenant-colonel, personally. On 19 October, he gathered the officers of the 13th and then 30th corps, on October 20th, those of the 10th. In his memoirs he remembered the "path" followed on that occasion:

> "1. Records from the month of August. Task; my plans to accomplish it; establishment of the 10th Corps. Action of command, equipment, training.
> 2. Rommel's interference on August 30th.
> 3. General framework of the *Lightfoot* plan issued on 14 September. Destruction of enemy tanks.
> 4. Situation in the first days of October. Army not trained. Gradual conviction that the operational plan must be changed to suit the capacities of the troops. A new plan; "crumbling" operations.
> 5. *Key points of the plan*. Three steps:
> - breakthrough of the 30th Corps
> - penetration of the 10th Corps
> - breakthrough of the 13th Corps
> fighting for the positions and tactic advantage.
> Harsh battle and crumbling operations. Definitive collapse of the enemy.
> 6. *The enemy.*
> His weakness; limited number; shortage of fuel supply, ammunition and food. The morale is high, except, perhaps, for the Italians.
> 7. *Us*.
> An immense superiority in guns, tanks, soldiers. We can fight a long battle and we will.
> 832 25-pounder howitzers
> 753 6-pounder guns
> 500 2-pounder guns

1,200 tanks (470 heavy)
Morale extremely high.
General conduct of the battle.
Methodical progress; destruction of the enemy piece by piece, with calm and confidence. Hit the tanks and the Germans. The enemy cannot sustain a long battle, we can. We must therefore face him harshly, no unit commander must lighten the pressure; be oriented towards a *relentless fight* for about one week. The entire matter will last 10 days.
Do not expect immediate spectacular results.
Actions on solid bases.
A quick reorganisation of the objectives.
Keep balance.
Demand aggressive attitude.
Continue the pressure.
If we do all of this victory is assured.
Morale. Measures for obtaining it. Speeches.
Each soldier of the army is a fighter. There are no non-fighters. All are trained to kill the Germans. My message to the troops.
11. Stakes.
12. The soldiers must remember what to say if captured: rank, surname, army service number.

B.L.M"[80].

The order of the day, issued in the morning of 23rd, started with two eloquent phrases:

"When I became the commander of the 8th Army, I said that the task was to destroy Rommel and his army and that it would happen as soon as we were ready. We are now ready (...)"[81].

In the same morning Montgomery participated in a press conference. Many war correspondents were perplexed by the note of exhibitionism demonstrated while he was showing the battle plan and his intentions, and by his total conviction of success. But objectively, the commander of the 8th Army could feel more than sufficiently confident that the battle was already won.

In the afternoon, at 18:00, he was informed by the intelligence service that the enemy did not expect the attack for that night.

[80] *Ibid.*, pp. 126-127.
[81] *Ibid.*, p. 127.

4. Forces ratios

We have already spoken about the force ratio between the two parties. We must now consider the way it exactly appeared on the battlefield. A general picture can be synthesized in the following numbers:

Forces	ACIT			8th Army
	Ital.	German	Tot.	
Men	54,000	50,000	104,000	195,000
Infantry battalions	39	27	66	84
Other battalions	2	1	3	10
Field guns	371	200	571	908
Anti-tank weapons	150	372	522	1,451
Anti-aircraft weapons	740	600	1,350	812
Armoured cars	72	47	119	435
Medium tanks	279	211	490	1,029
Combat aircraft	230	110	340	973

Let's now go on to a short examination, reserving the right to return to the issue of assessing the extent of the attack and the possibility of the defence in the different stretches of the front and in the single conflicts.

Regarding the numbers related to the personnel (but also for those related to materials) there are different assessments, probably due to the different ways of considering the troops involved in battle. The overall extent of the Axis soldiers in North Africa was 146,000 soldiers, only 54,000 of whom were part of ACIT (and so employed directly or indirectly in the battle), 47,000 were *Delease* dependents, and 30,000 belonged to *Superlibia* and 15,000 to the Italian Navy and Air Force. The Germans generally accept the number of 50,000 soldiers, emerging from the Supreme Command, but, for instance, a reliable German source indicates less that 24,000 *fighting* personnel, while Liddell Hart indicates 27,000 men[84].

[82] Data derived from I.S.O. Playfair, *op. cit.*, vol. IV, p. 30 and pp. 409-491.

[83] E. VON ESEBECK, *op. cit.*, p. 136. The 24,173 combatants are classified in the following way: 3,940 of the 15th *Panzer*, 3,972 of the 21th *Panzer*, 2,826 of the 90th Light, 6.343 of the 164th Inf. Div., 3,376 of the *Ramcke* Paratrooper Brigade, 2,331 of the army artillery and 4,348 of the 19th Flak Div. It is worth remembering that, according to Rommel, the *Panzerarmee* had in August 82,000 soldiers (B. LIDDELL HART, *The Rommel Papers*, *cit.*, p. 267), while according to Bayerlein, the German *combat* force was equal to 34,000 men (*Ibid.*, p. 226).

[84] B. LIDDELL HART, *The military history of the Second World War*, *cit.*, p. 416.

It is certain that the Axis units were lacking sufficient reserves, both in personnel and materials, while the British were fully equipped. However, it must be said that even if the Italian divisions would have been completed to 100%, they still would have been weak compared to the powerful enemy units.

Looking at the table on the following page, the Italian A.S 42 Infantry Division in comparison to one like the British 41st, still valid during the battle of El Alamein, one notices the weakness of our infantry forces; 6 battalions versus 9. In addition, such a ratio of 2 to 3 was worsened by the scarce solidity of the Italian battalion:

COMPARISON BETWEEN OPPOSING INFANTRY DIVISIONS

Italian A.S 42nd Infantry Div.	British 1941 Infantry Div.
Division Headquarters	Division Headquarters
two Infantry regiments over:	three Infantry Brigades over:
Headquarters Company	Brigade Headquarters
three infantry battalions	three infantry battalions
one 81 mm mortar company	
one field artillery regiment:	three field artillery regiments:
Regiment Headquarters	Headquarters
four field Artillery groups	three batteries, (8 guns each)
one anti-tank and anti-aircraft group	
two 20 mm batteries	
	one anti-tank artillery regiment
	one light anti-aircraft artillery regiment
	one machine gunner battalion
	one reconnaissance battalion
one combined engineer battalion	one engineer battalion
	signal unit
Field catering section	one supply battalion
Medical section	three field ambulances
	a field workshop
	a field pool

7.000	soldiers	17,300
72	anti-tank guns	444
146	submachine guns	819
92	machine guns	48
18	medium mortars	56

–	light mortars	162
60	field guns	72
72	anti-tank guns	136
16	light anti-aircraft guns	48
35	various vehicles	268
142	trucks	1,999
72	tractors	159
–	trailers	197
–	universal carriers	256
–	armoured cars	6
147	motorcycles	1,064

Infantry battalion	Italian	British
Soldiers	450	800
Submachine guns and machine guns	27	120
Mortars	–	22
Antitank weapons	18	25
Motor vehicles	12	56
Tracked vehicles	–	22

In these conditions, even ordinary absences on leave, for sickness or any other reason were enough to cause difficulties; if we then add losses during the battle, a serious crisis would arise. On a tactical level, this explains why the choice was limited to a static defence for the Italian battalions. A tiny force with a "*miserable*" armament, as it was defined by Rommel, the Italians were rather a drag to the German forces. Rommel underlined many times the inherent weakness of Italian divisions.

The artillery was not much better. The 75 and 100 field howitzers had too limited a range (6 and 9 km respectively versus 12 km of a British 25-pounder); the 105/28 pieces, if subjected to a speedy rate of fire, had problems with the recoil brakes and, since they could not use the maximum charge, these too were limited to a 10-km range. Moreover, the wheels were not suspension-fitted and it was, therefore, difficult to move quickly from one firing position to another on rough terrain. The 75/27 and 100/17 howitzers, although equipped with "electron" wheels, could not withstand extensive towing time, and, therefore, had to be loaded on trucks for long transfers.

The picture of the anti-tank defence was not good at all. There were 72 anti-tank rifles and as many 47/32 anti-tank guns, against 444 anti-tank rifles, 88 2-pounder and 48 6-pounder anti-tank guns. Any comment would be superfluous.

The last observation concerns the combat service support. A comparison is not even possible. It is true that, in the Italian logistic chain, the army corps (and not the division) was responsible for supplies and that normally the division received some reinforcement (usually medical service units), but it was not enough to fill the gap: the Italian logistic misery was caused by narrow-mindedness.

It is clear that the inability of the A.S 42 type infantry division to correspond to correct tactical and organic principles was caused by the unavailability of motor vehicles. Two adjectives had been ridiculously abused with negative consequences by the Italian Force Organization Branch: *agile* and *slim*. These are quite frequently used in regulations and various communications of that time, and with convinced enthusiasm. In truth, no Italian unit, structured in an agile and slim way, was ever able to pass the crucial battlefield test. In North Africa, these two concepts would weigh on the difficulties in fighting and moving the infantry in the desert.

As for the armoured divisions, the comparative examination of the organizational tables is even less significant, considering that the British divisions had undergone a lot of modifications. Anyway, there is a big difference in the number of tanks, armaments, motor vehicles and services (see the table on the following page). There is an interesting series of modifications ordered by the Italian Army General Staff for the armoured divisions in Africa on the first days of October 1942. These modifications consisted in increasing the number of 75/18 self-propelled guns and decreasing the quantity of M 14 tanks. The tank battalion went from three companies (a total of 52 tanks) to two tank companies and one 75 self-propelled company served by tankmen (36 tanks and 10 self-propelled in all). The group of self-propelled artillery passed from 2 batteries (10 self-propelled guns in all) to three, each of them had 6 self-propelled and a command post tank, plus two tanks of the Group Headquarters. And, lastly, the divisional artillery: one regiment (over three field groups, one 88 anti-aircraft and two 75 self-propelled) passed to two; one of these was a self-propelled over three groups and one was multi-calibre (three field groups and one anti-aircraft). The armoured division would then have 108 medium tanks and 81 self-propelled, besides command post tanks and a radio, instead of the current 183 tanks and 20 self-propelled.

Let's take a look at the materials. The M tanks weighed 14.7 tons, that is to say, little bit more that the American M3 *Stuart* (12.5 tons), less than any other medium tank and half of the weight of the *Grant* (28.5 tons) and the *Sherman* (30 tons). Their 47 mm turreted gun could only compete advantageously with the 2-pounder guns of the *Crusader* II, *Matilda* II and

Valentine II (apart from the armour of the infantry tanks) and the *Stuart*, but not with the *Crusader* III and *Valentine* IX, equipped with a 6-pounder weapon, and even less with the *Grant* and the *Sherman*, equipped with a 75 mm cannon. The theoretical off-road speed of the M 14 tanks was about 8 km/h: equal to the *Valentine*, but more or less inferior to almost all other types of tanks. The thickness of the armour reached 40 mm, while the least protected enemy tank (the *Stuart*) was 44 mm thick.

COMPARISON BETWEEN OPPOSING ARMOURED DIVISIONS

Italian Armoured Division	British Armoured Division 1942
Division Headquarters	Division Headquarters
one tank regiment over:	one armoured brigade over:
regiment headquarters company	brigade headquarters
three tank battalions	three armoured regiments
	one motorized infantry battalion
	an infantry brigade over:
	brigade headquarters
	three infantry battalions
one *bersaglieri* regiment:	divisional artillery group over:
regiment headquarters company	two field regiments
three *bersaglieri* battalions	one anti-tank regiment
one 81 mortar company	one light anti-aircraft regiment
one artillery regiment over:	one machine gunner battalion
two field artillery groups	one armoured car regiment
two self-propelled artillery groups	one engineer battalion
one armoured car cavalry battalion	one signal unit
one combined engineer battalion	one supply battalion
one field catering section	one repairs battalion
one medical section	two field ambulances
one combined transportation unit	one health section

8,600	men	13,235
18	anti-tank rifles	348
900	light and medium machineguns	868
–	light mortars	60
9	medium mortars	18
70	field guns	64
250	anti-tank guns	219
34	light anti-aircraft guns	88

205	various vehicles	374
918	trucks	1,415
54	prime movers	53
–	trailers	134
40	armoured cars	64
–	armoured vehicles	37
–	universal carriers	151
189	battle tanks	280
504	motorcycles	956

German tanks were at a disadvantage too, thought less visibly. The best ones, that is to say the few Pzkw IV and IV Sp., equipped with a 75 gun, short and long respectively, were inferior to the *Grant* and the *Sherman* not only in weight (23 tons versus 28.5 and 30 tons) but also in armour's thickness (50 mm versus 57 and 76 mm).

On 23 October ACIT had 490 medium tanks at its disposal, 31 10-ton German light and 20 6-ton Italian light tanks. This is the distribution of the medium tanks:

XX Corps: 279 M14 tanks (not considering 16 command post tanks or radio centres);
DAK: 85 Pzkw III, 88 Pzkw III Sp., 8 Pzkw IV and 30 Pzkw IV Sp.

The Italian tanks were concentrated in the *Ariete* (129 tanks), the *Littorio* (116) and the *Trieste* (34 tanks); there were about 60 being repaired; moreover, *Delease* could count on two companies of tanks (22) near the border. There were also 35 75-mm excellent self-propelled used as tanks. Every armoured division had two groups of such vehicles, while *Delease* had a formation battery (6 pieces and two command post tanks).

The two *Panzerdivisionen* were equipped more or less in the same way: the 15th *Panzer* had 106 tanks while 21st had 100. There were 20 armoured vehicles being repaired.

Let's look at the 8th Army now. Montgomery had defined *Lightfoot* counting on having 1,114 tanks at his disposal; 87 in fact, on 23 October, he had 100 less on the front, and therefore: 194 infantry tanks, 119 medi-

[85] H.I. JOSLEN, *Orders of Battle of the Second World War*, London, H.M.S.O., 1960, p. 131.
[86] H.I. JOSLEN, *op. cit.*, p. 129.
[87] F. DE GUINGAND, *Operation Victory*, London, 1947, p. 154.

um-light tanks, 716 medium tanks for a total of 1,029 armoured vehicles (see table on the following page).

In addition, there was an experimental platoon made up of three *Churchill* IV with a 57 piece, assigned to the 7th Motor Brigade and, above all, another 200 various types of tanks as a reserve and about 1,000 being repaired[88].

In conclusion, against 490 Italo-German medium tanks, there were 1,029 British-American armoured vehicles, without considering the 200 vehicles in immediate backup; but in fact the real comparison should be made between the 211 *Panzers* III and IV and the 910 of the 8th Army, as the German and British considered the Italian M 14 quite outdated for war purposes. And, finally, to assess the armaments, we might compare the 38 Pzkw IV and IV Sp. with the 422 *Grants* and *Shermans* (with superior weight and armour).

UNIT	Stuart	Crusader	Grant	Sherman	Valentine	Total
Com. 10th Corps	-	-	2	-	-	2
1st Armoured Div.	-	8	-	-	-	8
2nd Armoured B.	-	68	1	92	-	161
10th Armoured Div.	-	7	-	-	-	7
8th Armoured B.	-	45	57	31	-	133
24th Armoured B.	-	45	2	93	-	140
7th Armoured Div.	-	7	-	-	-	7
4th Armoured B.	67	-	14	-	-	81
22nd Armoured B.	19	50	57	-	-	126
90th Armoured B.	-	49	37	36	-	122
23rd Armoured B.	-	-	-	-	194	194
2nd Infantry Div. NZ	29	-	-	-	-	29
9th Infantry Div.	4	15	-	-	-	19
Total	119	294	170	252	194	1,029

As for the anti-tank artilleries, the ratio was more or less 3 to 1 to the benefit of the British. ACIT put some 150 of 47/32 and 88 Italian pieces in line, and 372 of 50, 75, 76 and 88 German pieces; the 8th Army had 602 2-pounder and 849 6-pounder guns.

[88] According to Liddell Hart, the 8th Army had 1441 tanks at its disposal on the front line, more than 1,100 in the units and more than 300 in reserve, of which 200 joined the battle (*The Tanks, cit.*, p. 229). According to Carver, the British provisions were equal to 1,341 tanks, of which 1,136 in the units (1,021 efficient) and 200 in reserve (*op. cit.*, p. 127).

The Italian anti-aircraft artilleries could hardly be called as such since all of them were equipped with 20-mm machine guns. The German ones had an excellent 88 piece which was, by far, the best anti-tank weapon.

There is still the aviation to be compared, but to make things simple, we will only look at the combat aircraft. The Axis air force had only 200 fighters and various efficient bombers. The 5th Air Squadron had, in fact, 230 aircraft: 3rd and 4th Wings, 8th Fighter Group and 50th and 101st Assault Group. The *Fliegerführer* had three groups of fighters and of *Stukas*, for a total of 110 airplanes. These 340 airplanes were all that could be mustered to oppose the enemy who was believed to have about 1,600 fighters, 500 of which were in reserve[89].

In fact, the forces of Marshal Coningham, in the Egyptian sector, seemed to have different dimensions, though they were absolutely sufficient to the need. They included: 120 light British bombers, 39 American *Western Desert Air Force* medium bombers, 2nd *Royal Air Force* Wings: the 211th Group with 299 fighters and bombers (including 75 American) and the 212th Group with 128 fighters. We must then consider the units depending on the Headquarters of the Egyptian air force with 76 fighters; the 201st Group with 32 fighters and 88 bombers; the 205th Group with 108 bombers, the 9th *American Bomber Headquarters* with 51 heavy bombers. In total, there were 973 combat airplanes, three times more than the Axis[90].

[89] According to the surveys of the German air-photography reconnaissance, on 23 October there was the following distribution of forces: Alexandria Sector: 705 airplanes (481 fighters and 224 bombers), Cairo sector: 290 airplanes (179 fighters and 111 bombers), Suez sector: 590 airplanes (186 fighters and 404 bombers).

[90] I.S.O. PLAYFAIR, *op. cit.*, pp. 490-491.

Chapter five

THE THIRD BATTLE OF EL ALAMEIN

1. Operation *Lightfoot*

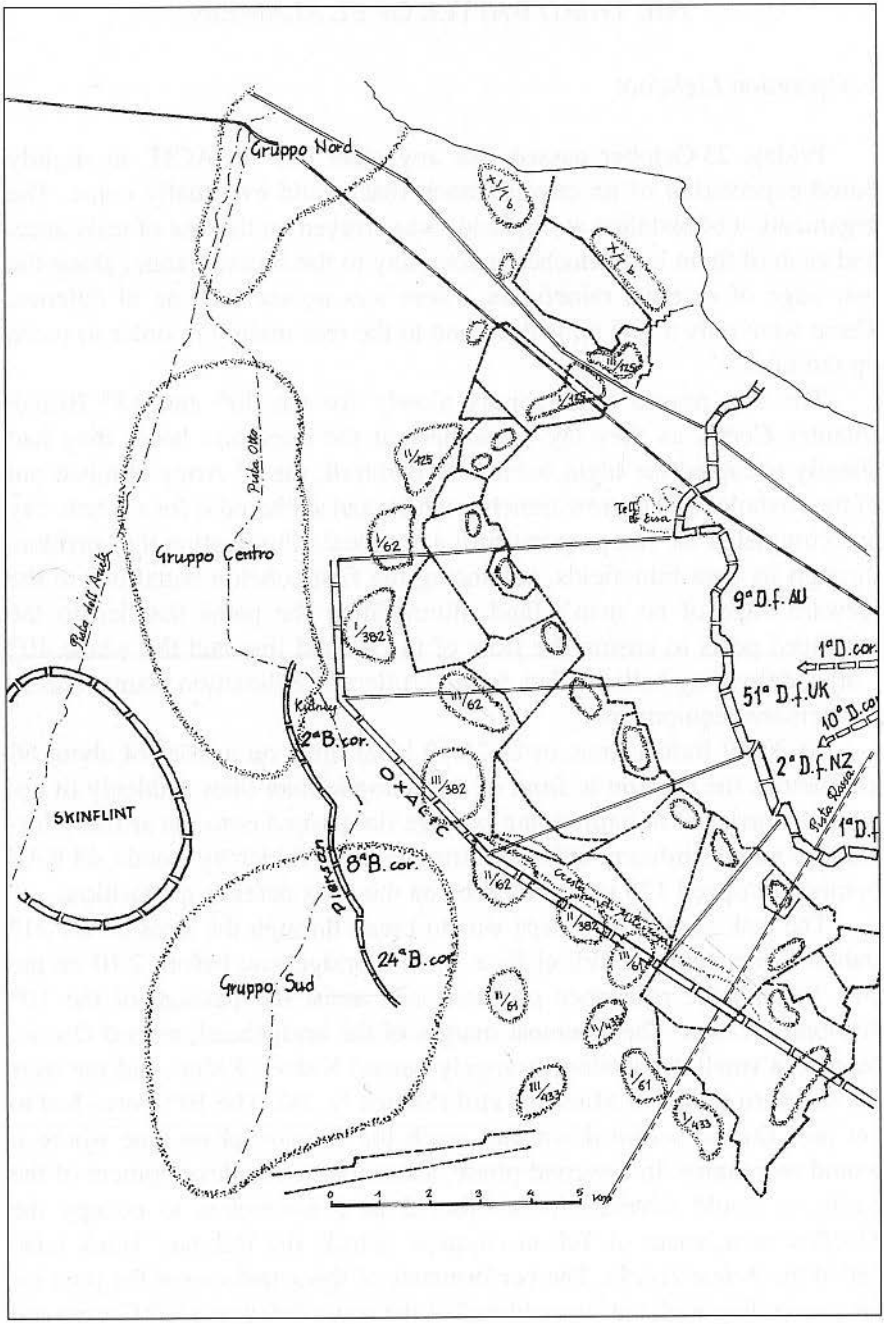
Friday, 23 October passed like any other day for ACIT, in slightly bored expectation of an enemy attack that would eventually come. The organization of battalion strongholds was arrayed on the line of resistance, and each of them had detached a company to the security zone, along the rear edge of external minefields. There was no second line of defence. There were only a few units detached to the rear mainly in order to patch up the line.

The day passed exhaustingly slowly for the 30th and 13th British Infantry Corps, as they lay motionless at the departure bases they had silently occupied the night before. At nightfall, the 8th Army climbed out of the foxholes and narrow trenches which had sheltered it for a whole day and completed the last preparations: a hot meal, illuminating the corridors through its own minefields, advancing the first echelon battalions to the forward edge of no man's land, illuminating the paths that led to the advanced posts to ensure the flow of the second line and the whole 10th Corps, delivering ballistic data to the artillery fire direction teams, checking personal equipment.

At 20:40 Italian time, or at 21:40 local time, on a front of about 60 kilometres, the horizon in front of the Italo-German lines suddenly lit up, while a hurricane of hammering barrage fire poured onto the artillery formations and the infantry defensive strongholds. Hidden by clouds, 48 RAF bombers dropped 125 tons of bombs on the Axis defence disposition.

The task of the 30th Corps was to break through the lines of the 21st Italian Corps south of Tell el Eisa, open a bridgehead before 2:10 on the 24th, beyond the resistance positions and assist the passage of the 10th Armoured Corps. The foremost margin of the bridgehead, named *Oxalic*, reached a small depression, strangely named Kidney Ridge, and ran over the southern slopes of Miteiriya Hill (Sketch N. 38). The 10th Corps had to get past *Oxalic* before dawn and reach the *Pierson* phase line where it would reorganise. In a second phase, according to the development of the battle, it would advance for another 5 or 6 kilometres to occupy the *Skinflint* area, south of Tell el Aqqaqir, astride the Rahman Track (also called the *Ariete Track*). The performance of those tasks were the premise for proceeding with the "crumbling" of the static defences (30th Corps) and

Sketch N. 38
"THE 30TH AND 10TH CORPS' PLAN OF ATTACK"



allowing such an operation without interference by the reserves of the Axis forces (10th Corps). Along the 10 kilometres of the attack sector, Leese had amassed two Australian, three Scottish, three New Zealand and three North African brigades with five tank regiments. In total 30,000 soldiers supported by 320 tanks and 450 artillery guns, against 6-7,000 Italo-German infantrymen and about 260 field guns (including the armoured reserves of the area).

The role of protagonist, at first, had been entrusted to the British batteries, in charge of softening the static structures and then facilitating the progression of the infantry. The preparation fire was, therefore, extremely violent and lasted for a quarter of an hour, from 20:40 to 20:55. It was enough to inflict serious losses on the defences and, above all, to disrupt the artilleries and the ACIT transmission network, with a consequent delay in the adoption of counter-measures.

The zero hour for the beginning of the attack was scheduled for 21:00. From 20:55 to 21:00 the guns fell silent. When they started firing again, they targeted the Italo-German advanced positions for 7 minutes. Then they moved on to the support plan that was supposed to last until dawn. This support consisted in time scheduled firing concentrations on further objectives, but in the New Zealand sector it took the form of a rolling barrage, moving forward every three minutes (see the picture on the following page).

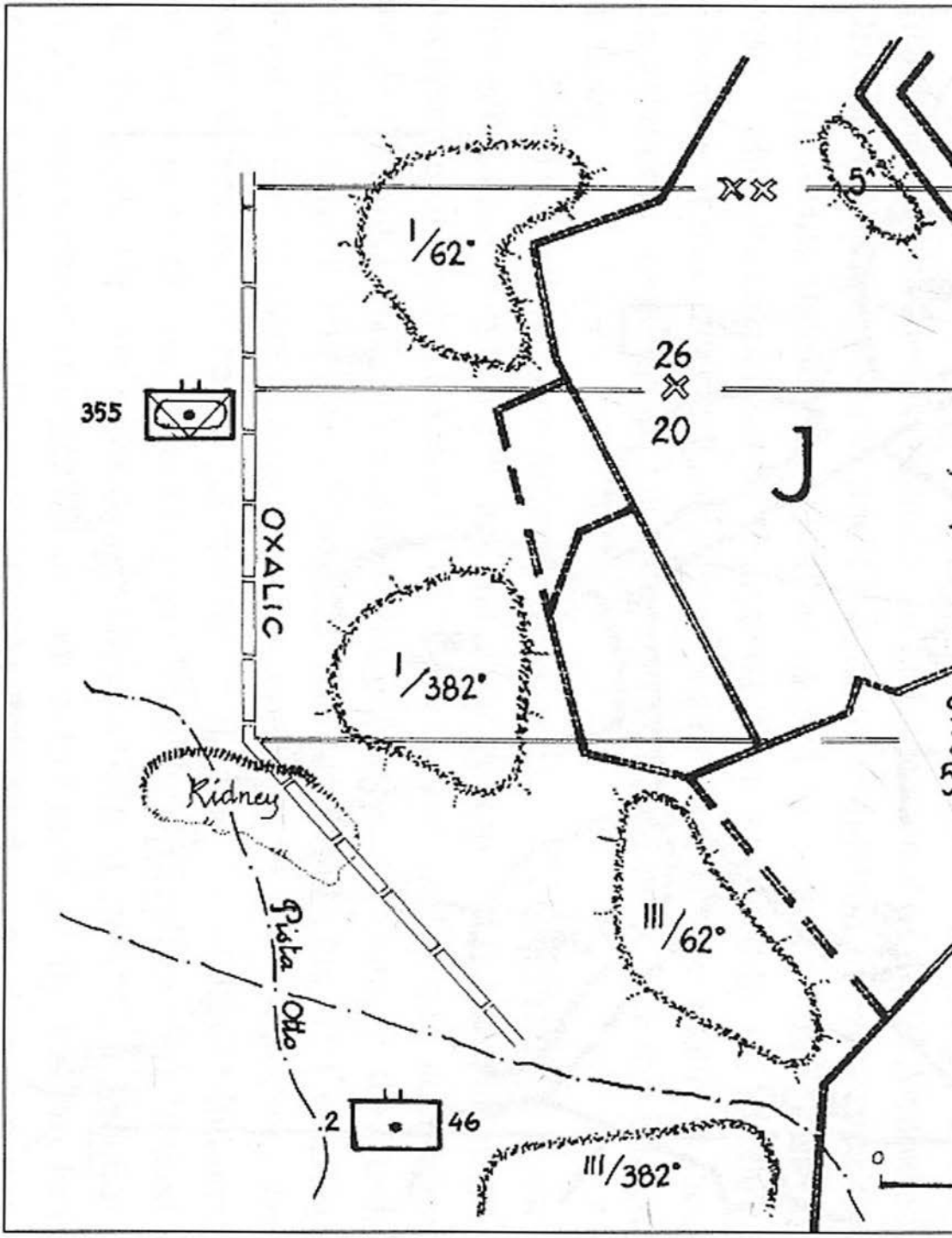
The four divisions moved in line, each of them with two brigades in the first echelon. The depth of the attack up to *Oxalic* varied from 8 km for the Australians to 5 km for the South Africans and was marked by reference lines and intermediate objectives. Following the direction was facilitated by bursts of tracers fired by the *Bofors* automatic cannons, shot parallel to the limits of the brigade sectors, while reflectors cast their strips of light against the sky, in order to reduce the effects of the dust that was taking over the battlefield. As it can easily be seen, the sectors and directions of the attack were indicated in a straight line, apart from the layout of the identified static structures and of the minefields. In the desert, where the landscape did not present any favourable tactical trails and the attack was planned to develop as an overwhelming steamroller, and at night, when it was easier to get lost than during the day and thus waste precious time, maximum priority was given to the measures that would allow a regular advance of the brigades. Within these parameters, the straight line progression became the most feasible tactical line to follow, and it was to be marked with tracers.

The 9th Australian Infantry Division was stationed to the right of the offensive force. Together with the 24th Brigade, it engaged the 1st and the

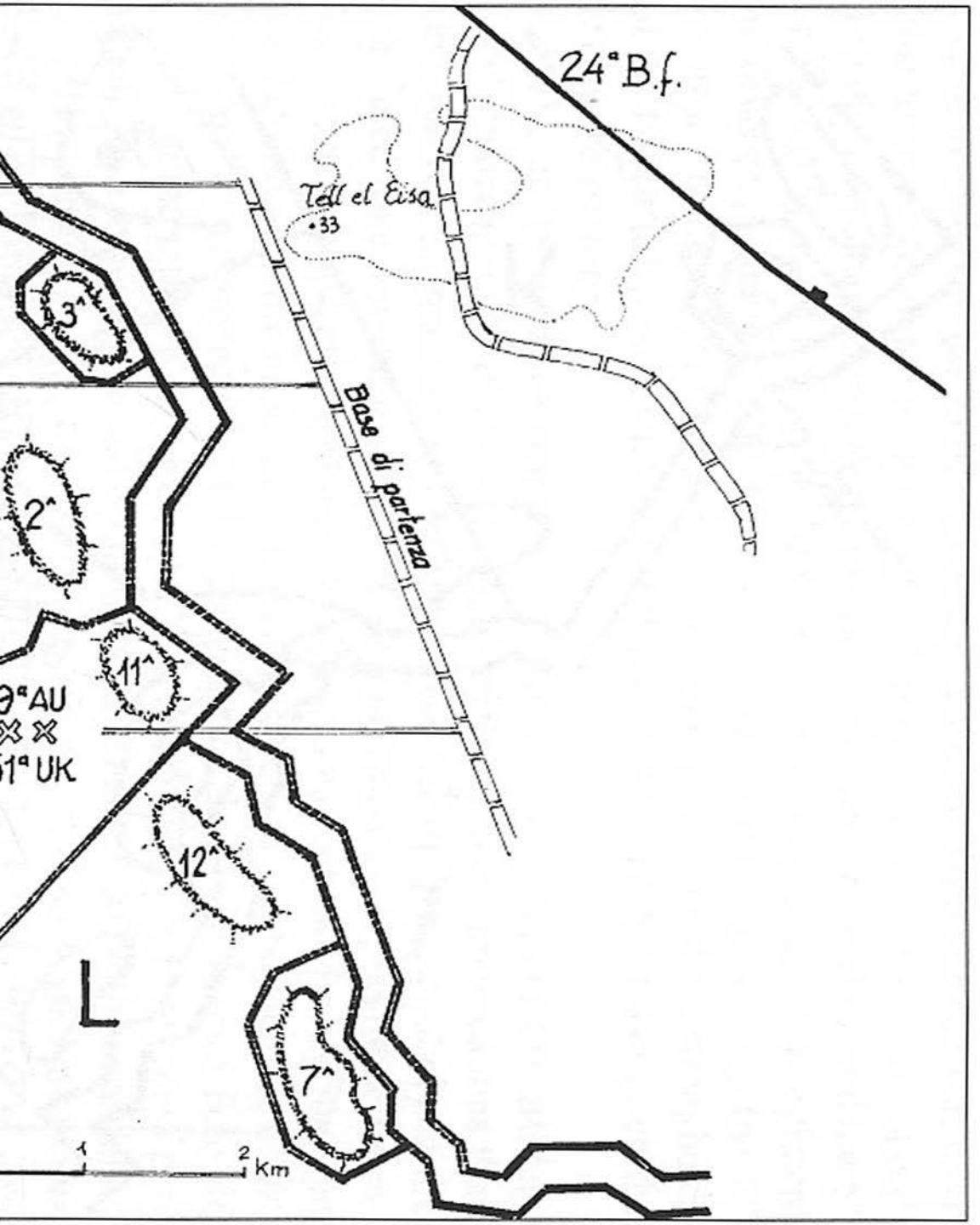
Sketch

"THE ATTACK OF THE 9TH AUST

DURING THE NIGHT



N. 39
TRALIAN INFANTRY DIVISION
T OF 24 OCTOBER"



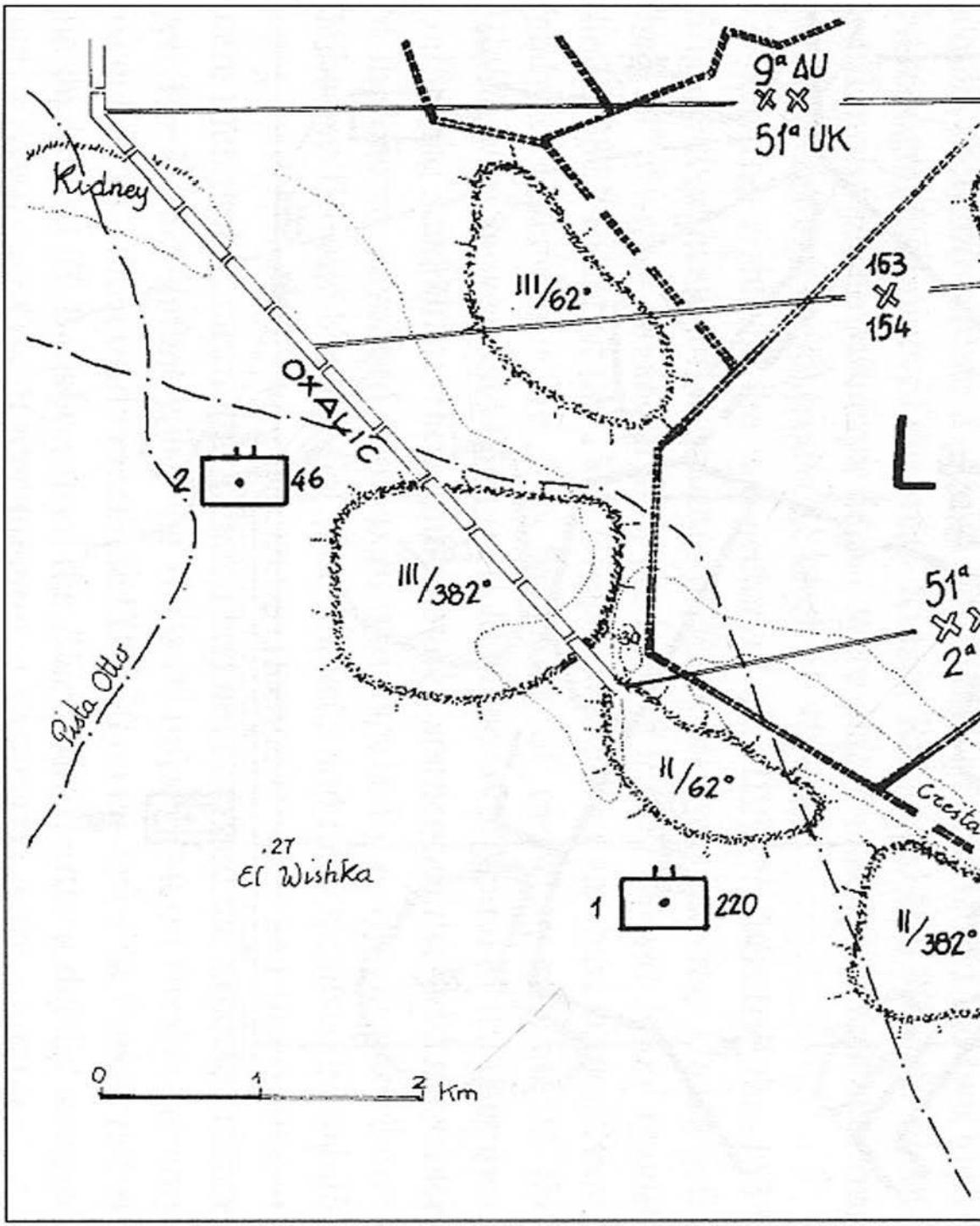
3rd/125th German Motorized Infantry astride the coastal road to deceive the defence; together with the 26th and 20th, it advanced to the south of Tell el Eisa (Sketch N. 39), while protecting the exposed side with the divisional cavalry regiment, anti-tank guns, machine gun and pioneer units. The 26th Brigade, acting in a very narrow area, swept the 3rd Company of the I/62nd Infantry away, isolated the 5th of the II/125th Infantry and met no further opposition up to the strongholds of the I/62nd Infantry. The struggle did not last long, considering the unrivalled hammering effected by the British artillery, and in a few hours the objective was accomplished. Moreover, a company of the II/125th Infantry managed to move north and join the II/125th Infantry. The 20th Brigade repelled the 2nd Company of the I/382nd German Infantry, destroyed the 11th Company of the III/62nd Infantry, but met with some setbacks in the final phase. It hoped to join the 40th *Royal Tanks* to break through the resistance position, but the tanks kept getting stuck in the minefields. Eventually, once the tanks had arrived, it managed to defeat part of I/382nd and move up to about one kilometre from the objective. Once on the objective, Morshead had to admit with regret that the *Oxalic* line was not suitable for a proper consolidation, and therefore decided to draw the two brigades back about one kilometre.

The 51st Infantry Division had the most onerous task, as the width of *Oxalic* was almost double in comparison with the bases of departure. It would, therefore, create a certain divergence of efforts and the two highest topographic points of the area - Kidney Ridge and Hill 30 at the northwestern rim of the Miteiriya ridge - were placed exactly on the outer rim of the sector and the objective (Sketch N. 40).

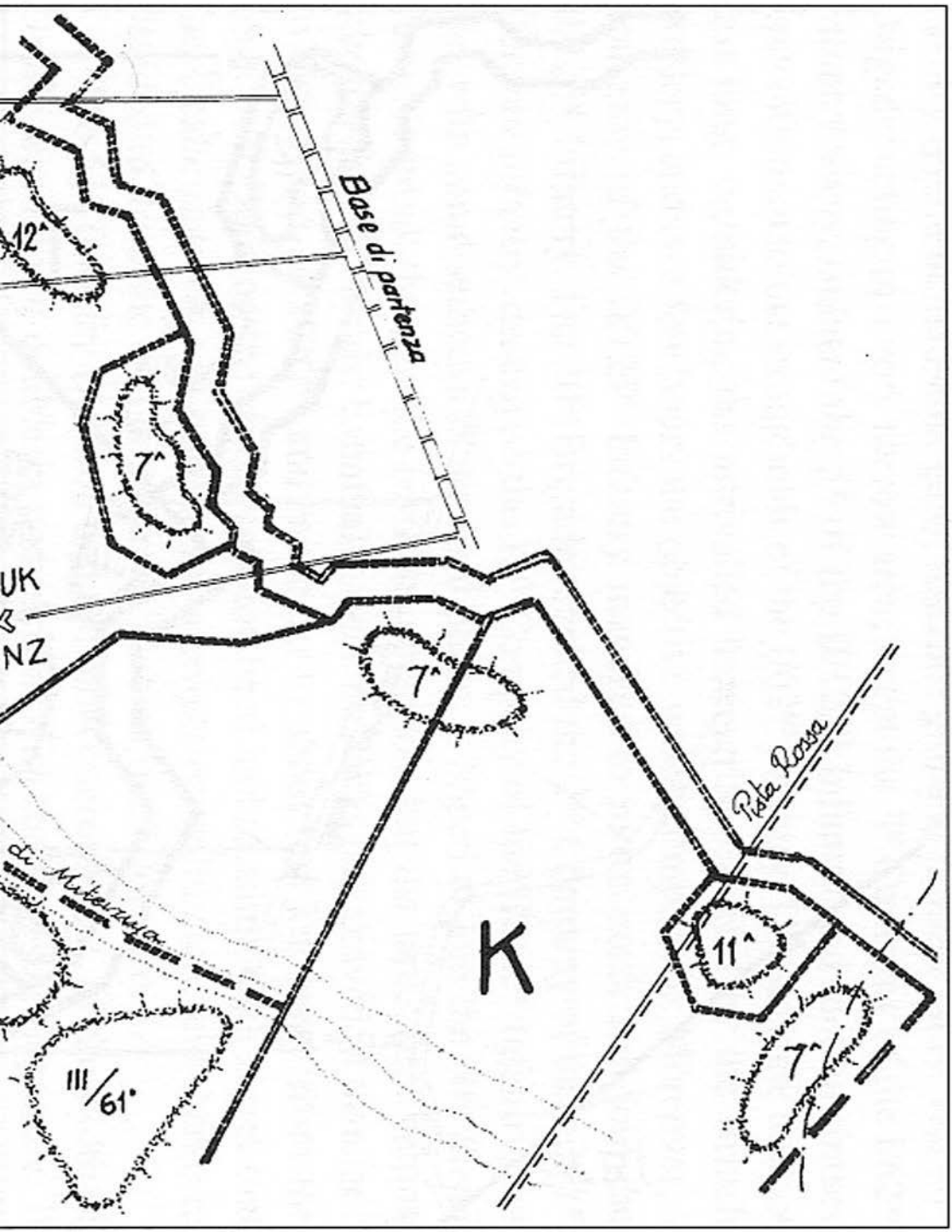
On the right, in the sub-sector of the III/62nd Infantry, the 153rd Brigade together with a squadron of *Valentines* was moving. On the left, the 154th Brigade advanced with the bulk of the 50th *Royal Tanks* against the III/382nd Infantry; the 152nd Brigade was left on the base of departure, ready to intervene. The five battalions of the first echelon of the *Highlanders* moved onto the minefield to the shrill sound of the bagpipes. Unlike the Australians, they immediately experienced the bold resistance of the enemy advanced companies and especially a violent interdiction defensive fire and barrage fire. The setbacks and delays caused by significant losses, the difficulty in clearing the minefields and the confusion were such that, at dawn, the division had not obtained the expected results yet. The III/62nd Infantry and the III/382nd Infantry stood firmly; the only exception was the already mentioned Hill 30 on the left side, conquered by the decimated 7th Battalion from the *Black Watch* after a deadly struggle with a company of the II/62nd Infantry at about 3:00 in the morning.

Sketch N

"THE ATTACK OF THE 51ST H
DIVISION DURING THE N



N. 40
IGHLANDERS INFANTRY
IGHT OF 24 OCTOBER"

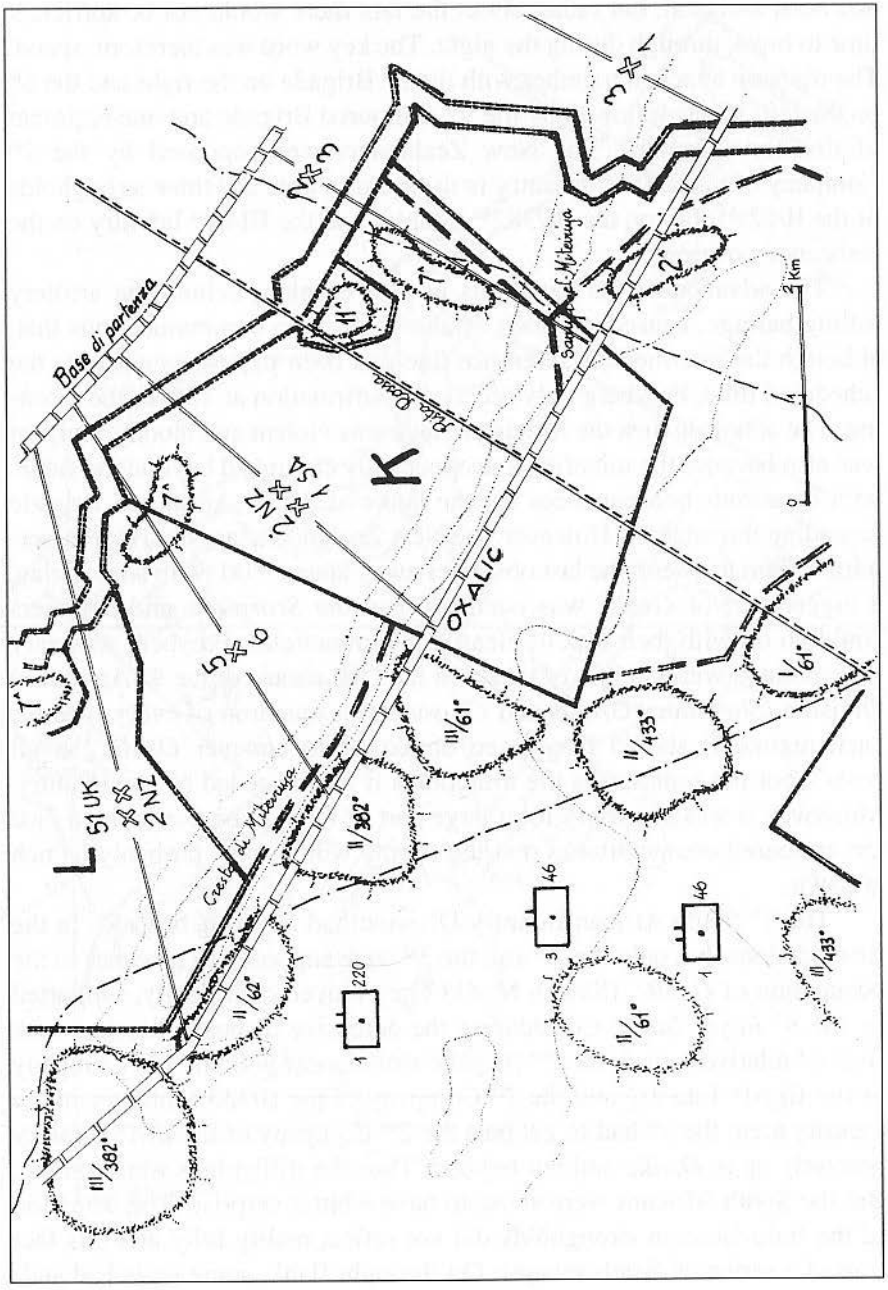


The 2nd New Zealand Infantry Division had to get beyond the western part of the Miteiriya ridge to reach their objective (Sketch N. 41). Freyberg was not worried about the eventuality of missing the piece of *Oxalic* he had been assigned, but rather about the fact there would not be sufficient time to break through during the night. The key word was therefore: speed. The division attacked together with the 5th Brigade on the right and the 6th on the left; it was followed by the 9th Armoured Brigade and one regiment of divisional cavalry. The New Zealanders were opposed by the 7th Company of the II/382nd Infantry in the security area and three strongholds of the II/62nd Infantry, the III/382nd Infantry and the III/61st Infantry on the resistance position.

The advance of the battalions in first echelon, behind the artillery rolling barrage, caused so much trouble with radio communications that, although the intermediate reference line had been passed regularly at the scheduled time, Freyberg only received confirmation at 2:00 in the morning. The action against the Miteiriya ridge was violent and bloody, and that was also because the minefields unexpectedly continued beyond the ridge, with disastrous consequences for the tanks of the 9th Armoured Brigade preceding the infantry. However, the New Zealanders' aggressiveness permitted them to sweep the last obstacles away and at 3:00, with some delay, a bigger part of *Oxalic* was occupied and the *Scorpions* and deminers could go on with their task of clearing the minefields. Freyberg was very disappointed with the loss of tanks. In fact, the means of the 9th Armoured Division (*Shermans*, *Grants* and *Crusaders*, a squadron of every type for each regiment) should have been employed to conquer *Oxalic* "at all costs", but not sent across the minefields if not preceded by the infantry. Moreover, it was necessary for a large part of them to be available to face the armoured counterattacks that the enemy would most probably launch at dawn.

The 1st South African Infantry Division had all of its brigades in the first echelons, but only the 2nd and the 3rd were supposed to take part in the occupation of *Oxalic*. (Sketch N. 41) They moved confidently, supported by the 8th *Royal Tanks*. Considering the defensive dispositions, their task seemed relatively easy: the 2nd Brigade would meet with the 11th Company of the III/61st Infantry and the 7th Company of the II/433rd Infantry in the security area; the 3rd had to get past the 2nd Company of the I/61st Infantry precisely up to *Oxalic* and not beyond. Thus the difficulties were limited. But the South Africans were about to have a bitter surprise. The detection of the Italo-German strongholds did not reflect reality fully and this fact caused a series of disadvantages. On the right flank, some units had sud-

Sketch N. 41
"THE ATTACK OF THE 2ND NEW ZEALAND INFANTRY DIVISION DURING THE NIGHT OF 24 OCTOBER"



denly been involved in chaotic struggles, and suffered serious losses; consequently, the artillery firing plan underwent some hurried adaptations which caused even more confusion; some minefields, the existence of which had been ignored, added more delay and hitches. In short, it was not until sunrise that the 3rd Brigade occupied part of its objective, on the extreme left of the action sector, but the division was not able to proceed.

A little bit further south, beyond the 1st South African Brigade, the 4th Indian Infantry Division had correctly accomplished the task of keeping up the rigorous diversionary action in the Ruweisat sector, occupied by the *Bologna* Division.

The unexpected entrance of the British batteries into the action at 20:40, against the strongholds and artillery formations, made it immediately clear to the 21st Corps Headquarters that the operation had probably started. The surprise sought by the enemy with a sudden opening of fire at the end of an utterly calm day, the width of the hammered front and the extraordinary violence of the shooting over the sector, convinced General Gloria that *"it was the beginning of one of those offensive operations on a grand scale, which the Army Headquarters and* Delease *Intelligence Service had been saying were imminent for days"*[1].

Unfortunately, things seemed to get worse. At about 1:30 on the 24th almost all 1st echelon companies were overwhelmed and the opponent was proceeding towards the line of resistance. Soon, the situation became critical for the II/62nd Infantry, faced by the 5th New Zealand Brigade and 37 tanks from the *Royal Wiltshire Yeomanry*. Consequently, Gloria ordered General Masina, the commander of the *Trento*, to get the II/61st Infantry, kept in the second echelon, closer to the threatened sector to launch a counterattack at dawn if needed. But at 2:30, the III/62nd Infantry, which was bearing the attack of the 153rd Scottish Brigade, reported the destruction of two company level strongholds, a setback not compensated by the losses inflicted on the *Highlanders*. And, worse yet, it indicated the presence of enemy elements infiltrated into the positions of the III/382nd German Infantry.

At daybreak, even the strongholds of the II/382nd Infantry and the III/61st Infantry proved to be seriously damaged by the New Zealanders. Until this point, the ACIT Headquarters had not intervened at all. It is probable that they found it difficult to get oriented and, in any case, intended to play the few cards they had correctly as well as cost-effectively.

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[1] Historical Diary of the XXI Corps; 23/10/1942.

While Leese could be quite satisfied with the first night, the same could not be said of Lumsden. The opening of two big passages for the 1st Armoured Division (General Briggs) and the 10th Armoured Division (General Gatehouse) was assigned to these two divisions. Each of them had a task to realize at least three parallel corridors in a lane established astride the sector limit between the Australians and the Scots for the 1st Armoured Division (2nd Armoured Brigade and 7th Motorized Brigade) and within the New Zealand sector for the 10th Armoured Division (8th and 24th Armoured Brigades and 133rd Motor Brigade). The first lane flowed into Kidney, the second onto Miteiriya at about mid-ridge.

The timetables for the 10th Corps were scheduled in the following way: at sunset, departure from the assembly area; at 23:30, the vanguards had to reach the south of El Alamein station; between that time and 1:00, the divisions were supposed to refuel and draw up in columns, each of them on three tracks; at 1:00, except in the case of Montgomery issuing a counter-order, departure would begin. The Headquarters of the 8th Army counted on taking its armoured units beyond *Oxalic*, much before dawn, and arranging on the *Pierson* line the 2nd Armoured Brigade (161 tanks) to the north, 8th Armoured (140 tanks) to the centre and 24th (133 tanks) to the south. Later, after dawn, the two wing brigades would advance for a couple of kilometres, protecting the exposed side with their motorized infantries; then, in the morning or even later, the army corps would move to *Skinflint*, on the Rahman Track, ready to destroy the northern portion of the ACIT armoured reserves. But with wisdom:

> "Under no circumstances", *prescribed Lumsden,* "should you hurl yourselves blindly down against the enemy anti-tank artillery or try to pass through the narrow passage full of tanks. In the last two cases, you must prepare a well coordinated plan, which foresees destroying the anti-tank guns by the artillery and machine gunners"[2].

With the optimism of the plan, the armoured divisions had the right-of-way on all the tracks at 1:00, but it was granted that they would help the infantry to break through the resistance position if needed.

The clearing of minefield lanes was entrusted to two task force formations. The *Minefield Task Force* of the 1st Armoured Division was made up of the 2nd Battalion of the *Rifle Brigade*, a tank platoon from each regiment of the 2nd Armoured Brigade, two squadrons and one field engineer

[2] M. CARVER, *op. cit.*, pp. 198-199.

company, some signal elements and a military police unit. The task force of the 10th Armoured Division was composed of one squadron and two field engineer companies, one field park company, some signal elements and one military police unit.

While the 500 armoured and wheeled vehicles from the 10th Corps were waiting south of the El Alamein station, the two special groups moved forward together with the infantry. The Task Force of the 1st Armoured Division started its work at about midnight. It made its way slowly with many difficulties, including malfunctioning of several mine detectors, and at about 4:00 it had to stop half-way because of the tough resistance put up at a stronghold by the III/62nd Infantry and at another by the III/382nd Infantry. Briggs had the 2nd Armoured Brigade and the 7th Motor Brigade advance anyway; a progression at walking pace, in a dense cloud of dust and smoke, with arguments and doubts about the situation and the tension caused by some tanks and motor vehicles taken out of combat by mines appearing here and there. At dawn, the division was spread along the three passages making up the northern lane, with its head still at a distance from *Oxalic*.

The Task Force of the 10th Armoured Division was also all set to operate in the New Zealand sector at about midnight. It met with the same problems as those that occurred further north, but at dawn four passages through the southern lane were opened up to the Miteiriya ridge. Gatehouse put the division in columns: first the 8th Armoured Brigade, then the Division Headquarters, the 24th Armoured Brigade and, in the end, the 133rd Motor Brigade. But the final result was disappointing. The regiments of the 133rd Motor Brigade were advancing without any coordination, due to the differences in the time needed for clearing the passages. So, when they reached the Miteiriya ridge, they not only found other minefields and some scattered mines, but also the hammering anti-tank fire of the II/382nd Infantry and III/61st Infantry. Eight *Crusaders* and as many *Grants* were neutralized. To give an idea of the conditions of the division at daybreak on the 24th, it is enough to say that the 24th Motor Brigade had scattered through no man's land, an area flooded by the Australian, Scottish and New Zealand artilleries and vehicles. Moreover, the 133rd Motor Brigade could be found astride the Red Track, about 5 kilometres south-west of the El Alamein station. To say it with a comment from the British side: "*The congestion was horrible and confusion reigned. One had the impression of finding themselves in a parking lot full of badly organized vehicles during a race on a small, dusty race track*"[3].

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 204.

In the 13th Corps sector, the breakthrough was entrusted to the 7th Armoured Division (General Harding), helped by the 44th Infantry Division (General Hughes) as it was without infantry. The plan was divided into three phases. In the beginning, the division supported by the artillery of the 44th Infantry Division had to get past the *January* and *February* minefields, passing between Deir el Munassib and Qaret el Himeimat, while the 1st French Infantry Brigade (General Koenig) was in charge of facilitating the operation, by infiltrating from the south to the area west of Qaret el Himeimat (Sketch N. 42). The second phase consisted in eliminating any resistance of the 10th Italian Corps, up to Gebel Kalakh. The last part of the plan depended on the development of the fighting: if everything went well, the 13th Corps would deepen the penetration.

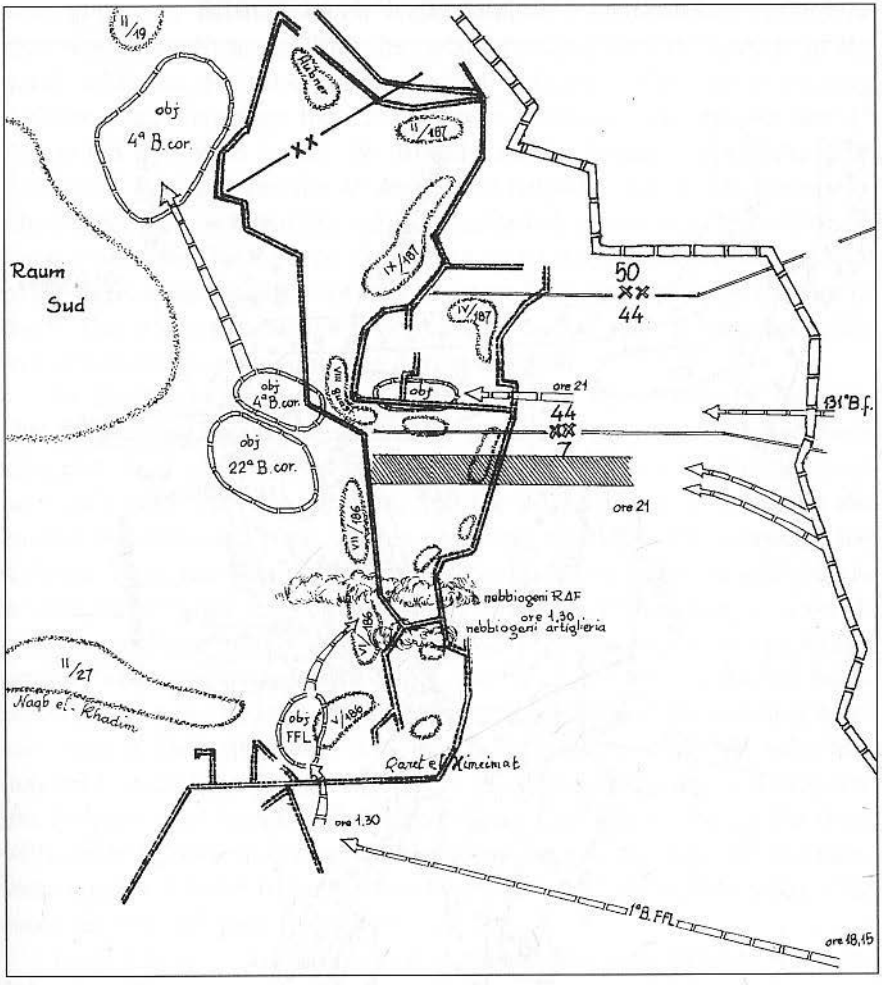
Taking the available troops into consideration, the British effort was applied to the centre of the *Folgore* sector, a few kilometres north of Qaret el Himeimat, on a narrow front of attack. A Task Force had to open four passages through *January*, and then the 7th Armoured Division would pass through them with its brigades in columns. The flanks were protected by the 7th Battalion of the *Queen's Royal Regiment* in the north, and by two impenetrable smoke screens set up by the RAF and by the artillery in the south.

At 21:00 the *Queen's* left the departure base. Unfortunately, the direction of the attack did not coincide with the forward structure supported by *January*, but rather with a trail of mines scattered over an empty space, controlled from the south by a salient defined by the defence line (Sketch N. 43).

The British soldiers then came under the fire of the 22nd Combat Sappers Company and the 6th Paratrooper Company, deployed in the north-east angle of the salient. In addition, contrary to what happened in the sector of the XXI Corps, the *Folgore* artillery immediately started the barrage fire. The *Queen's,* in short, found themselves so badly placed that they lost 180 soldiers including the commander, and hardly managed to keep the position west of *January*, without even reaching the Whisky Track. They were not able to arrange themselves in defence until 3:00.

In the meantime, the Task Force of the 7th Armoured Division opened the way with a fight. It was made up of the 44th Reconnaissance Regiment composed of *Bren* carriers, two companies from the 1st Battalion of the *Rifle Brigade*, two engineer squadrons, a platoon of *Stuarts*, one anti-tank battery and six *Scorpions*. A stretch of almost 3 kilometres of the security line was garrisoned by 400 soldiers of the 6th and 19th Reinforced Paratrooper Companies, under the control of the *Ruspoli* Task Group. Here too, the beginning was characterised by confusion and delay because some

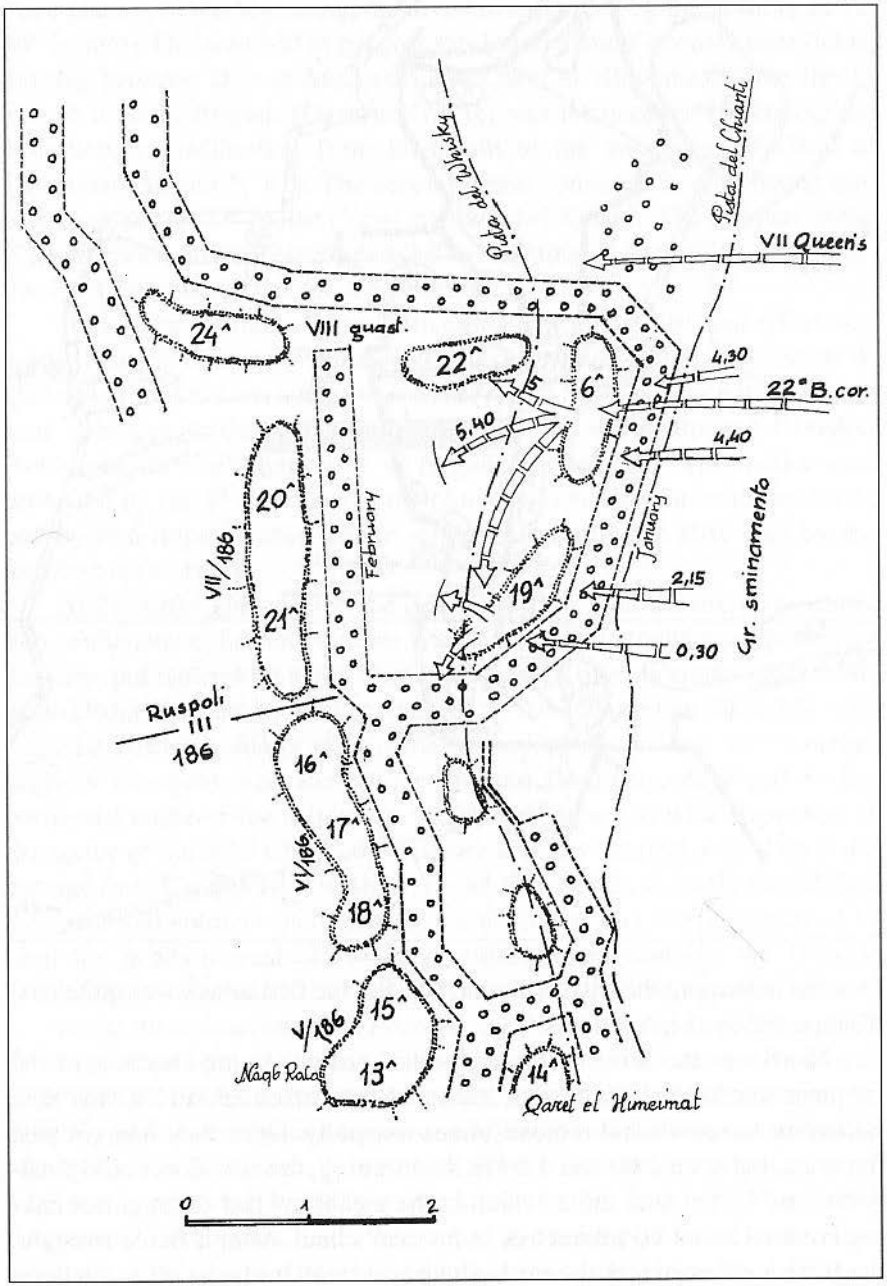
Sketch N. 42
"THE PLAN OF ATTACK OF THE 13TH BRITISH CORPS"



lanterns indicating the way had gone out. So, the first attack was quite easily repelled by the defenders.

Moreover, the *Scorpions* were neutralized one by one because of the frequent mechanical failures or losses of the personnel, and it was then necessary to search and remove mines manually. Once they had got past the hitch, between 2:00 and 4:00 in the morning, the corridors could finally be used by the tank units, which in the meantime had come closer having covered about 10 kilometres in no man's land. After a fierce struggle, the British riflemen had already built up two small bridgeheads in the heart

Sketch N. 43
"THE ATTACK OF THE 7TH BRITISH ARMOURED CORPS DURING THE NIGHT OF 24 OCTOBER"

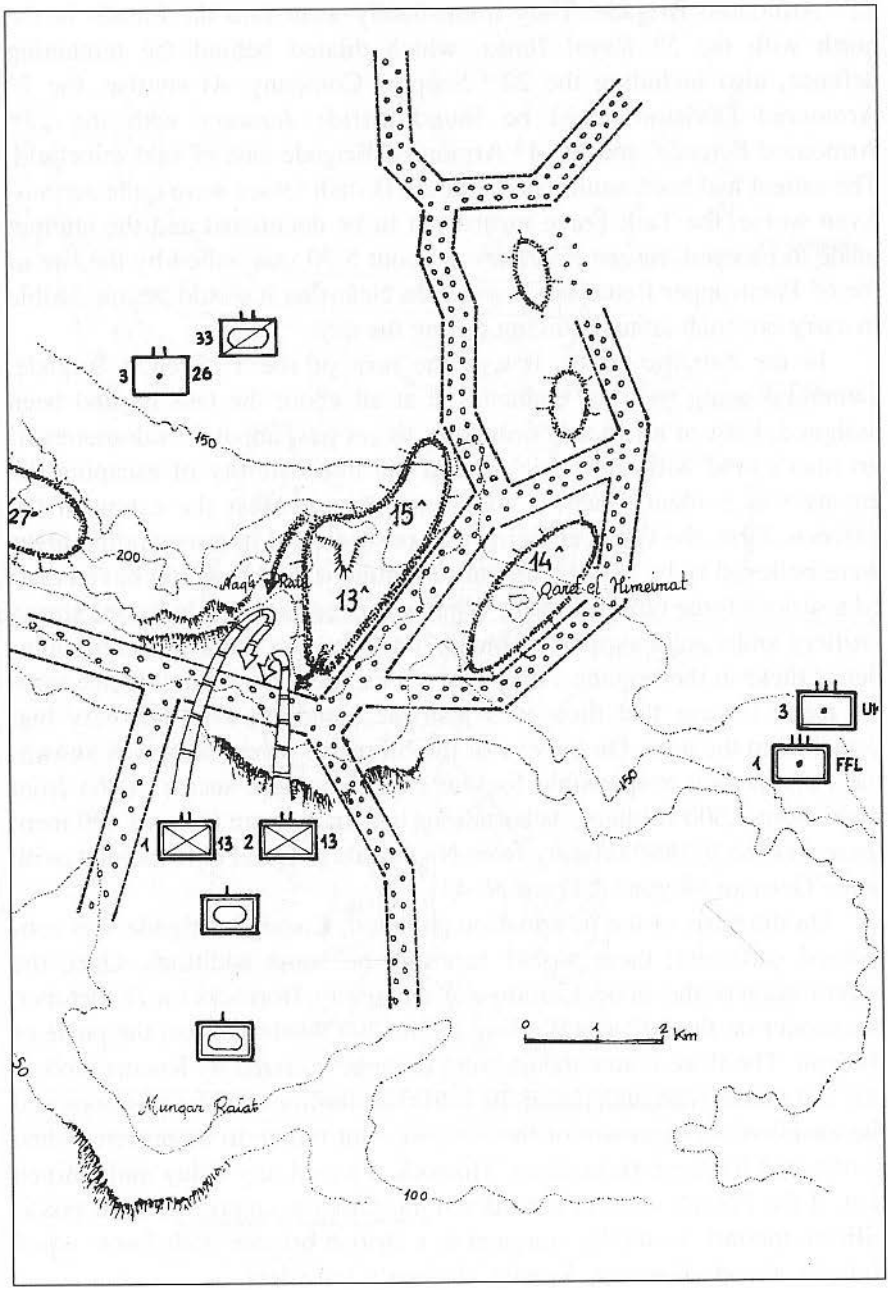


of two of the *Folgore* strongholds, but while the 6th Company had been semi-annihilated, the 19th was still struggling. General Harding did not want to wait for the completion of the de-mining operation and incited the 22nd Armoured Brigade. They immediately went into the breach in the north with the 5th *Royal Tanks,* which dilated behind the remaining defence, also including the 22nd Sappers Company. At sunrise, the 7th Armoured Division could be found astride *January* with the 22nd Armoured Brigade, and the 4th Armoured Brigade east of said minefield. The salient had been annihilated, but the British losses were quite serious. Even worse, the Task Force turned out to be decimated and the attempt made to proceed toward *February* at about 5:30 was halted by the fire of the 6th Paratrooper Battalion. It was then clear that it would be impossible to carry out such an undertaking during the day.

In the extreme south, it was the turn of the 1st French Brigade. General Koenig was not enthusiastic at all about the task he had been assigned. First of all, it was necessary to get past about 15 kilometres of no man's land with the vehicles, and the impossibility of escaping the enemy was evident. Then, it was necessary to assess the extent of the defence. First, the Qaret el Heimemat position and its surrounding areas were believed to be kept by an entire regiment, and it would have created a serious force ratio problem. What was needed was at least one strong artillery and a solid support of tanks, but there was not a sufficient number of these in the brigade. After few weeks, the British intelligence service made it clear that there was just one battalion, even not very big, detached in the area. On the eve of the offensive, everything was known: the *Folgore* was responsible for the entire southern sector of the front with about 3,500 soldiers; its battalions had an average force of 400 men; there was the V/186th Infantry from Naqb Rala to Qaret el Himeimat, with some German 88 guns (Sketch N. 44).

On the basis of the information gathered, Koenig's Brigade was considered sufficient; there would naturally be some additions. Once the organisation of the tactical action was underway, Horrocks on 18 October, Alexander on the 19th and Harding on the 20th wanted to feel the pulse of the unit. The three commanders were quite bewildered by Koenig's obvious bad mood, who underlined the intrinsic sturdiness of the positions and the excellent arrangement of the *Folgore*. But rather, to be precise, when confronted by these hesitations, Horrock rejected any delay and warned that, if the French soldiers considered the mission superior to their possibilities, the task would be assigned to a British brigade with forces equal to those already foreseen. Koenig obviously fell silent.

Sketch N. 44
"THE ATTACK OF THE 1ST FRENCH BRIGADE
DURING THE NIGHT OF 24 OCTOBER"



The operation had to eliminate the southern pillar of the line of the Italian 10th Corps and end with the occupation of the El Taqa plain by the evening of the 24th. Koenig divided it into three subsequent phases: the conquest of Naqb Rala by the night of 24th; the elimination of the defences of Qaret el Himeimat and getting in touch with the 7th Armoured Division in the morning of 24th; continuation of the effort up to Naqb el Khadim and consolidation in place. The troops were therefore articulated in four groups. Group A, that is to say the 32nd Reinforced "Demi Brigade" (Lieut. Col. Amilakvari) had to launch the attack from south towards the objective of Naqb Rala; Group B, a battalion level task force, had to stay at a distance, in the initial detachment area in Qor er Laban, ready to move to Naqb Rala and then to Naqb el Khadim; Group C, made up of the 1st French Artillery, 3rd British Artillery, anti-tank and anti-aircraft batteries, provided fire support from a formation south-west of Qaret el Heimemat. Security was assured by Group K, which would avoid interference with three armoured detachments during the action of Group A and, in particular, the intervention of the German Kiehl Group stationed in the north-west area of Naqb Rala.

At 19:15, Group A started the approach and reached the minefield between Qaret el Himeimat and the Qattara Depression at about 23:00. It seems that the passage through the obstacle was the beginning of the misadventures of the French units. The radio connections failed and from that point on everything seemed to proceed in isolated actions. Although the direction of the attack and the real force ratio would lead to hope for the best, with the lack of harmonisation between the efforts and cooperation between artillery and infantry, the results could only be disappointing. The violent resistance of the paratroopers did the rest.

The V/186th Infantry of the *Folgore* was in defence: a very shabby battalion, even if reinforced with supporting weapons, spread over a line of more than six kilometres. The Commander, Lieut. Col. Izzo, had 400 soldiers, and could rely on the following heavy weapons: 17 anti-tank guns (47/32 calibre), 9 machineguns and 3 81 mm mortars[4]. The morale and the psychological preparation were high and ready for the imminent engagement. Only the tactical connection with the II/27th of the *Pavia*, engaged on a wide front west of Naqb Rala, was missing. As for fire support, in the area there was: a 75 mm artillery group (whose normal sector was north-east), one 75 battery and one 81 divisional mortar company. There was

[4] The 4th 47 battery of the 185th Artillery and the 47 cannon company of the 186th Artillery and two cannon platoons of the V/8th *Bersaglieri* remained temporarily in place, dependant on the battalion.

also a German 88 battery but, just at the beginning of the French attack, it unexpectedly moved to the north without informing anybody.

The V Paratroopers had one company in Qaret el Himeimat and two behind, supported by *February*. For all of them, the main front was to the east. Considering the support offered by the terrain, Izzo felt relatively calm in relation to the attempts coming from east and south-east. The situation was different near Naqb Rala where the land descended softly toward the Qattara Depression, offering quite an attractive natural invitation as it led behind the formations and allowed for irruption behind the VI/186th Infantry or the artilleries.

Consequently, Izzo ordered the controlling of the Naqb Rala plain, dominated from above by 47/32 anti-tank weapons, through an intervention based on a reserve of about 100 soldiers, put together by subtracting a platoon from the rifle companies and adding artillerymen and sappers who joined voluntarily.

The 1st Battalion of the Foreign Legion reached the departure base south of Naqb Rala after 1:00; once it rearranged, it started to move at about 2:00. Soon after that, the noise of vehicles coming from south was signalled from Qaret el Heimemat, confirming the worse hypothesis of an attack behind the V Paratroopers. It was not possible to obtain barrage fire for many different reasons; the 75 group arrived the night before and had not been able to arrange its fire preparation, the 75 battery did not receive the orders immediately, due to problems with radio communications, and the mortar company had problems with firing. But seeing how the French, that should have had the support of the British artillery with 44 25-pounder howitzers and 8 5.5-inch guns, did not receive the support they had hoped for, the defensive fire of the paratroopers was sufficient to stop these *legionnaires*.

At about 3:00, the advanced French elements, after getting past an unexpected minefield laid to protect the Naqb Rala zone, met up with a group of the reserves, ready to launch a counterattack. So they put up a struggle that lasted about one hour and a half. The difficulties with orientation and the extremely bold tactics carried out by the paratroopers, who acted in small groups assaulting violently from many directions with hand grenades alternated with firing, put the attackers in difficult position forcing them first to stand still undecided and then slowly move back. Shortly after 5:00, Colonel Amilakvari ordered the battalion to assemble further back, the II Battalion to enter the lists and the armoured company to be ready to intervene.

The second attempt was unsuccessful as well. Disintegration among the advanced companies, the firing base of the battalion and the lively

opposition of the 5th Paratroopers remaining reserves made the initial penetration of the empty space, which could have heralded important developments, come into nothing. As soon as the daylight increased visibility, the 75 group and the divisional mortar company entered into action throwing the French formation into disorder. Just before 7:00, the northern margin of the Naqb Rala was cleared. Only then did 6 German armoured cars of the 33rd Scout Group arrive unexpectedly from north; in the beginning, they aligned in front of the 47 battery, then, at about 7:30, they advanced southwards, firing against the retreating enemy[5].

The losses endured by the group of about 130 paratroopers taking part in the fight were: 24 dead (including one officer), 38 wounded (including Lieutenant Colonel Izzo and another two officers) and about 20 soldiers missing.

The 24th of October

At about 7:00 on 24 October, the infantries of the British 30th Corps were virtually, but not completely, positioned on *Oxalic* (Sketch N. 45). As for the front, the Axis forces received a hard blow: the security area had almost disappeared; the resistance position had been severely tried and could hardly bear an attack.

More precisely, from what Leese could make out, some battalions of the 62nd Infantry and 382nd Infantry had been overwhelmed by the formidable fire of the 8th Army artillery and then overpowered or heavily attacked, especially in the Australian sector. There was still fierce resistance by the III/182nd Infantry against the Scots and by the III/61st Infantry against the New Zealanders. In the South African sector the progress was limited, but, on the other hand, the plan did not expect much there.

This was the situation extracted from the communications coming from the divisions and from the search of prisoners; a situation which did not coincide with the expectations from the day before, not only because *Oxalic* had not been completely taken and the 10th Corps had not got past the resistance positions, but essentially because the two big lanes were still mined.

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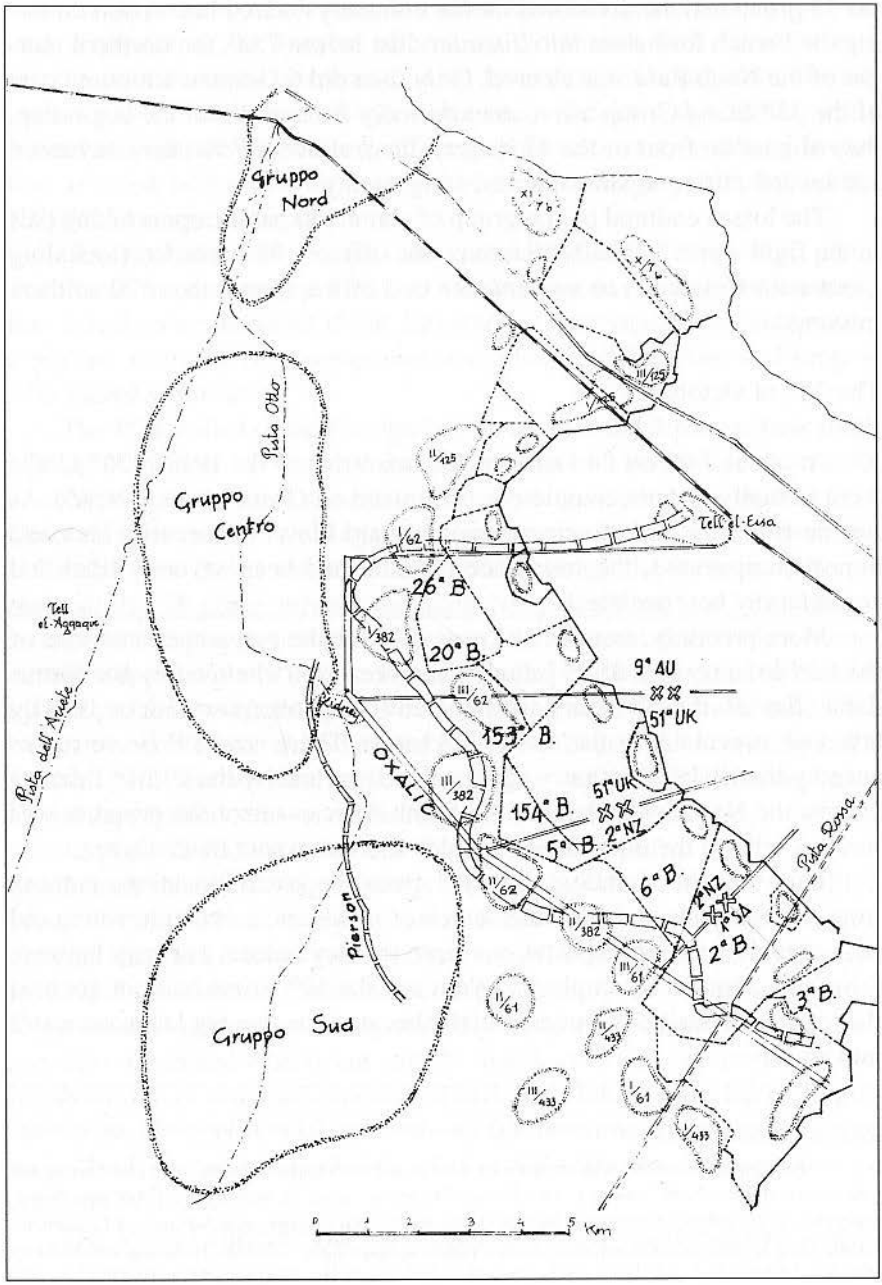
[5] The course of combat was reconstructed with a certain approximation, also considering the indications of JEAN-NOËL VINCENT, *Les Forces Françaises dans la lutte contre l'Axe en Afrique*, Vincennes 1983, and the testimony of RENATO MIGLIAVACCA, *La Folgore nella battaglia di El Alamein*, Milan, Auriga, 1983, and *Gli artiglieri della Folgore a Naqb Rala*, USSME, Historical and Military Memoirs 1979.

Sketch N. 45
"THE SITUATION IN THE NORTHERN SECTOR AT DAWN ON 24 OCTOBER"



The Headquarters of the 8th Army collected the numbers of the losses suffered during the night: they were not excessive. According to first estimates, the 51st *Highlanders* lost about 1,000 soldiers, the Australians and South Africans reported about 350 men lost in each division, while there were about 800 men lost in the New Zealand formation[6]. In short, there were less than 3,000 men for the 30th Corps and a trifling number for the 10th. The 13th reported about 500 dead, wounded and missing.

The first decision made by Montgomery, relevant to the southern sector, was to dedicate the Australians to "crumbling" the position of resistance during the night and the Scottish to completing the occupation of *Oxalic*. The New Zealanders had to push toward the Miteiriya ridge to the south. In the meantime the 10th Corps had to clear up the two lanes. The 13th Corps had to break through the *Folgore* if the 7th Armoured Division was not able to do so. This would be done by using one brigade of the 44th Infantry Division in a night attack.

The infantry was trying to get better entrenched in the advanced positions of the 30th Corps under the response of Italo-German firing; on the eastern slope of Miteiriya two armoured brigades, the 9th reinforcing the New Zealanders, and the 8th of the 10th Armoured Division, were amassed in an incredible congestion. Since sunrise, Freyberg had formed a favourable opinion of the tactical situation, feeling an irruption of tanks farther up the Axis lines was still possible. He then ordered (7:00) the 9th Armoured Brigade to rearrange and pave the way for the passage of Gatehouse's division; he then informed the High Command that "*it was the right moment for the 10th Armoured Division to make the maximum effort and break through*". The matter then passed from the 30th Corps to the 10th and then to the 10th Armoured Division, which answered that its armoured vehicles were blocked by a jam existing on the only useable track in the New Zealand sector. While the answer was coming back, at about 8 o'clock, Freyberg asked Leese once again to urge Lumsden, and when he received Gatehouse's answer he did not give up. In his opinion, it was simply a question of good will; on the right side of the sector there was already a useable passage. And then the congestion did not depend on the New Zealanders, but on lack of leadership in the British columns! And so, at 10.30, he informed the 30th Corps that he had ordered General Currie to advance with the few tanks left in his 9th Armoured Brigade beyond the Miteiriya ridge and, consequently, he would need support from Gatehouse.

[6] The data is from M. CARVER (*op. cit.*, p. 220). According to R. WALKER, the New Zealanders had 420 wounded or missing and 41 dead soldiers (*op. cit.*, p. 287).

Besides the fact that Currie saw forty enemy tanks behind the ridge, and before moving he wanted to know what artillery support he would obtain and which armoured units would follow him, the 10th Corps, newly involved, said it was sorry, but it could not see the advantage and the possibility for such an intervention. Leese was agitated by all these phone call exchanges and at, 10:45, he showed up at the Headquarters of the 2nd New Zealand Infantry Division. He was informed there about the struggle that the 5th Brigade was sustaining to stop an enemy counterattack and about the prospect of a second counterattack against the 6th Brigade. But he then realised that the position of Miteiriya guaranteed full reliability for defensive purposes.

While Leese and Freyberg were conducting a reconnaissance along the line, a message from the 10th Armoured Division arrived, in which Gatehouse, in short, said that he was contrary to any advance without protection on his right side. However, since he had already been told to offer the New Zealanders all possible support, he proposed to arrange his units along the ridge, in order to repel the enemy attempts, while waiting to resume the attack the same or the following night, clearly with the German anti-tank barrier removed by the action of the artillery. Probably, the idea was to be discussed and so, in the end, Lumsden and Gatehouse decided to meet at the New Zealand Headquarters. The meeting of the four commanders concluded like this: if Montgomery (already brought up to date on the telephone by Leese) insisted on pushing the 10th Corps up to *Pierson,* it should be done as soon as possible: the same night Gatehouse - together with Briggs - would attack supported by all the available artillery of the 10th and 30th Corps, that is to say with about 300 howitzers. The 9th Armoured Division and the New Zealand Cavalry Regiment would move behind a mobile curtain too, harmonizing the efforts in order to hit the southern side. In order to avoid any misunderstandings, Montgomery called personally:

> "According to my orders", *he wrote later on,* "I expected the armoured divisions to make their way boldly and push into the open space. But there was a lot of reluctance about it. During the morning I had an impression that they had a passive attitude (...). The commander of the 10th Corps did not demonstrate any energy or the determination necessary for when things go wrong and there was a general insufficiency of offensive will in the armoured divisions of the corps (...)"[7].

[7] B. MONTGOMERY, *Memoirs, cit.*, p. 129.

Consequently, once he had acknowledged the necessity of a shake, Montgomery called Lumsden and told him to "wake up" his divisions, because if there were somebody who wanted to back down, he would not hesitate to replace him with a general with more character. Lumsden convinced Briggs and Gatehouse, specifying that the armoured vehicles had to break through without worrying about losses.

The ACIT Headquarters had slowly put together the pieces of the difficult puzzle and in it the lack of precise sector-based responsibilities weighed negatively. During the night it became clear that the J and L mined boxes had been penetrated by the British infantry and tanks, the security area had practically disappeared and the position of resistance was broken on both sides near the L box. The III/62nd Infantry had been destroyed by the Scottish and the II/62nd by the New Zealanders. The leaks were filled thanks to the intervention of the 115th German Infantry and the XII/133rd Tank Battalion of the *Littorio*. Units of the II and III/382nd Infantry kept resisting tenaciously, but it was feared it would not last long. At 6:15 Stumme tried to face the events:

> "The DAK and the XX Armed Corps", *he ordered,* "must immediately restore the situation with strong units of the 15th Armoured Division and of the Littorio Armoured Division. First task: throw the enemy back behind the resistance position"[8].

As it can be observed, to put such an intervention into action, two Corps Headquarters and two divisions had to be in agreement. Later on, it was acknowledged that the I/62nd Infantry had been overwhelmed on edge of the Australian sector, and that there was still one company defending on the margin of the J box. As compensation, the III/61st Infantry managed to avert the threat of being surrounded.

At 7:45, the first counterattack took place, conducted by the II/8th *Panzerregiment,* the IV/133rd Tank Battalion and the DLVI Self-propelled Group, and its target was to restore the situation at the J box. Then, with the action of a second tactical group (the I/8th *Panzer* and the XII/133rd Tank Battalion), in the late morning, it seemed that the situation had improved. General Lungershausen proposed arranging a new line of strongholds with the infantry and entrusting the new sector to the 164th Infantry Division, but Stumme preferred restricting the action to the simple restoration of the lost structures. And so, two mixed German compa-

[8] Historical Diary XXI Corps, 24/10/1942.

nies would replace the I/62nd Infantry, an armoured battalion would replace the I/382nd of Infantry, the III/115th Infantry would relieve the III/62nd Infantry and the II/61st Infantry would take over from the II/62nd Infantry.

At midday, ACIT ordered gathering the rest of the 62nd Infantry in a formation unit and holding the line at all costs, considering that the last available infantry battalions had already been employed.

In the afternoon, at 14:00, the 51st *Highlanders* resumed the effort to reach *Oxalic* and liberate the southern lane for the 1st Armoured Division. After a short and bloody attack by the II *Seaforth* against a stronghold of the III/382nd Infantry, the 2nd Armoured Brigade plunged forward "at all costs", as it was specified by Briggs, and finally managed to break through and get closer to the formation of the II/46th *Trento* artillery, which started to fire at close quarters. The intervention of a mixed armoured group, consisting of the Italian XII/133rd Tank Battalion and the DLVI Self-propelled Group, stopped and pushed back the penetration after a fight that lasted until sunset. The 2nd Armoured Battalion now had 120 tanks available (half *Sherman*, half *Crusader*) versus the 161 from the night before. The British estimated they had destroyed about 30 Axis tanks of the at least 80 they had been attacked by.

While the 1st Armoured Division was laboriously confronting Kidney, the 10th was about to start its advance. Lumsden's orders were for them to get beyond the minefields, get in touch with the 1st Armoured and be ready to repel the *Panzers*. At dusk, the two armoured brigades, the 8th of General Custance and the 24th of General Kenchington, with 250 tanks, were stationed under the cover of the Miteiriya ridge. Behind the 8th Armoured Brigade, there was the 9th Brigade on the left, tasked with reinforcing the New Zealanders and keeping left of the 10th Armoured Division. The *Pierson* line was about 4 kilometres from the ridge. There were two actual dangers: the clearing up of the minefields, especially for the 24th Armoured Brigade whose direction of attack had changed in order to reach the 1st Armoured Division and was now cutting diagonally across the already opened and marked corridors; the crossing of the depression by the 8th Armoured Brigade south-west of El Wishka. The coordination of the progression would then be of vital importance.

But the operation was causing a lot of problems, even if it had not started yet. The sun was setting, when Freyberg, who, as *the lord of the mansion*, felt really involved, phoned Leese and told him frankly that in his opinion the 10th Armoured Corps was being commanded from too far back and that he was quite anxious about the way the imminent attack had been organized. His doubts were probably caused by the fact that there had

been many misunderstandings in the orders issued for the 9th Armoured Brigade, which was to harmonize closely with the 8th Armoured Brigade. Leese addressed Lumsden tactfully, but the conversation was probably not too encouraging, because later on he decided to inform de Guingand about his impression that the commander of the 10th Corps was quite sceptical of the results of the operation.

The 24th Armoured Brigade had been involved, since the beginning, in a series of setbacks caused or endured by the mine clearance teams, which had caused confusion, disorder and delay to the point that the first corridor was completed at 3:00 in the morning. Later on, it turned out to be impossible to find the radio tank and communicate the information to the Brigade Headquarters[9]. The 8th Armoured Brigade's fate was worse. Once it started to cross the ridge along the two passages opened by the demining teams, the desert was illuminated and a fire storm blew over the long columns proceeding slowly. A few Axis bombers carried out some raids, setting on fire 25 motor vehicles loaded with ammunition and fuel, and other vehicles. The disorder caused by the bombing, the obstruction resulting from the burning motor vehicles and the intense firing of the artilleries of the XXI Corps and the DAK were so serious that at midnight Custance decided to ask Gatehouse to suspend the attack. The commander of the 10th Armoured Division found it hard to get a clear picture of the events due to the malfunctioning of the radio, and was already upset about the delay of the 24th Brigade. He gave a negative answer, hoping that things would go better, but when he was called on the phone by Lumsden, he suggested (as Custance had done before) to put the brigades behind the Miteiriya ridge, to avoid being surprised by the enemy in the daylight.

At 1:30 Lumsden informed de Guingand about the proposal and expressed his agreement with his subordinates. The Chief of Staff of the 8th Army was quite upset when he learned of the critical situation and wanted to talk to Leese, whose command post was not far from the advanced army headquarters. There were no doubts: Montgomery had to intervene. At 2:30 the commanders of the 10th and 30th Corps were summoned for a decisive meeting.

The XXI Italian Corps, though powerless, followed the events of October 24th attentively. All that existed was in line, a line - let's add - run by ACIT and the DAK, considering the completion that was carried out using portions of the armoured reserves. Once everything had been used,

[9] M. CARVER, *op. cit.*, p. 223.

the XXI Corps was quite often bypassed by ACIT. Having weaker units at its disposal, the XXI Corps was quite often bypassed by the DAK, just as the *Littorio* was bypassed by 15th *Panzer*. But, considering the circumstances, no objections were raised by Gloria, or by De Stefanis, or by Bitossi. There was too much at stake to worry about formalities. But it is important to underline the direction of the battle taken by the Germans at various levels to realize what would happen during the retreat and to better understand the morale of the Italian infantry.

And so, the containment - that is how we should define it - implemented on the same position of resistance had been able to hold thus far, and was able to embarrass the British 10th Corps, with the static resistance of units, organised in strongholds and with really effective artillery fire.

Let's take a look at the 10th Corps sector now, starting from the extreme south. We had left the 1st French Brigade disappointed at the vane attempt against Naqb Rala. Although the attack had been cut down by the V Paratrooper Battalion, the retreat was even more distressing due to the intense fire from all the weapons and artilleries of the defence. Even worse, at about 8:30, while the II Battalion of the Foreign Legion was about to reorganise as best as it could at the bottom of an escarpment, a formation of the 33rd German Scout Group, moving alongside the plain from west, rushed into the I Battalion and put it in a difficult position. Soon, a general retreat was ordered, and each battalion went its own way. At about 10:00, Lieut. Col. Amilakvari was mortally wounded by fragments, while he was returning through the minefield south of Qaret el Himeimat. The French losses had been reported in various ways: from a minimum of one hundred, according to the *Journal de marche* of the 13th half-Brigade, to a maximum of 190, according to the 13th Headquarters of the British Corps, without other details[10].

In the centre of the *Folgore* sector, the last firing centres in the security area were brought down one after another during the course of the day. The survivors, almost all wounded, managed to withdraw back among the

[10] The failure was strangely - or perhaps not strangely - attributed to the intervention of the 33rd German Scout Group above all. According to the official summary, which was amply taken into consideration for the description of the battle, "*at 7:00, the German Armoured Scout Group AA.33 counterattacked the II Battalion of the Foreign Legion with 5 armoured cars*" and, once the retreat started, "*The latter (the 6th Company), hammered by the firing of the Italian armoured cars...*". However, while referring to the time between 7:30 and 8:30, he added: "Lieut. Col. Amilakvari informed General Koenig he had been forced to abandon the objective due to a counterattack of 6 tanks and many armoured cars..." (J.N. VINCENT, *op. cit.*, pp. 208-209).

lines of the *Ruspoli* Task Force. The British tanks moved back behind *January,* and the salient, as abandoned as it was, was only crossed by various enemy patrols. The stasis allowed the opponents time to prepare suitable measures according to their respective targets.

Honestly, the *Folgore* could not do much. It called the XXXI Combat Sappers Battalion back from a mine-laying duty and sent it to the north of the *Ruspoli* Task Force. Once it had been reinforced with the II/28th *Pavia*, it inserted that battalion between the positions of the sappers and paratroopers. The problem was to regain control of the security area and, to achieve this goal, Frattini optioned for a robust counterattack. Therefore, he gathered the I/8th Infantry, a small unit of the *Ariete* and one of German tank destroyers in the sector. General Harding wanted to resume pressure in order to create a bridgehead west of *February*, by using the 131st Infantry Brigade, now under the 7th Armoured Division. The 7th *Queen's* was excluded as it was in a horrible state after the action of the previous night. The disposition placed the infantry at the head, followed by the 22nd Armoured Brigade.

Both plans met with various problems. The Italian counterattack was probably born under bad auspices. It is not clear what happened then. The fact is that, without waiting for the arrival of the new battalion, or perhaps due to some other decision made at the last moment, the intervention was entrusted to two companies of the II/28th Infantry. So, when the commander of the I/28th showed up at the Sector Headquarters at 16:00, he was told that the action was already in progress. As for the armoured vehicles, only five *Panzerjaeger* reached the appointment place and, on their way, they ran over some *Folgore* engineers, including the company commander. In the understandable confusion and irritation that followed this *exploit*, the infantry companies set out for the security area on their own. They were called back, probably because of some misunderstanding or perhaps because the British batteries had resumed fire, but it was useless, as there was no radio connection. Once they had pushed quite a way forward, they stopped at dusk and got into a hasty defensive position, but were overwhelmed by the enemy shortly afterwards. The enemy then experienced some organisational disadvantages, so that the time scheduled to start the action was put off twice. He was only able to move out at 21:00.

At dusk of the first day of the battle, some strange news had been spread, at least among the commanders, which had caused a sense of unease: Stumme was missing and, consequently, von Thoma would take command of the army (remaining, at the same time, the DAK commander). There was something mysterious about Stumme's disappearance.

Shortly after daybreak, he had decided to go to the advanced units along with Colonel Butching, head of the army signals, and a captain as interpreter, to get a better idea of the situation. He must have been quite worried because, before the departure, he had told Colonel Westphal that he thought it would be convenient to ask for Rommel's return. About three hours later, his driver and the captain came back to the ACIT Headquarters with the lifeless body of the colonel on board. The two survivors reported that they had met an enemy machine gun (probably an element that had infiltrated the defence), whose fire they managed to avoid going into reverse and running away at high speed. Colonel Buchting was wounded mortally. They did not have any idea where the general may have ended up. It was probable he had been shot too and thrown out of the car[11].

The loss of a commander during a war may happen for whatever reason, but this was in addition to some other absences. We must remember that both the 21st and 10th Corps did not have their regular commanders, the DAK had a new Commanding Officer and Bayerlein, the Chief of Staff, was on leave. The news, of course, was not communicated to the subordinate units.

But the atmosphere, at least in the northern sector, was not ideal. During that night, Colonel Ruggeri Laderchi, Chief of Staff of the 20th Corps, wrote in the historical diary: *"The sudden and violent enemy action, though expected, dismayed the troops, which must now summon all their energy, in order to restore the seriously compromised situation"*.

To sum up the day, one must take a look at what was happening in Italy and Germany. Some reflections made by Cavallero on the phone with Mussolini at 18:00 can be used as an example:

> "This does not seem to be a large scale offensive. It does not bring a preparatory action to mind, everything is progressing too slowly (...)".
> "In any case, well informed sources say that this time the British have taken the initiative and if we assumed that their target is essentially defensive (...) we would underestimate the importance of this initiative (...)".
> "The only indication that may make us think that the offensive has really begun is the RAF message: *"(...) We now have a great chance to fight*

[11] The lack of will power demonstrated by the captain and the driver was amazing, both men being tested by Rommel. Mancinelli observed: *"I found, or perhaps I believed I found, a strange reticence to talk about the disconcerting event in the environment of the German Headquarters on that occasion, as if there were the desire to hide something that, however, one did not want to talk about at length"* (*op. cit.*, p. 188).

the enemy and end the war". I think that all this commotion has a political purpose, as Marshal Kesselring was saying yesterday".
"We prefer to consider things as big. Better if they are not wide (...). We are prepared as if there were a great offensive going on".

But later on, he sent a telegram to Bastico: "*Everything makes us think that the British attack on the El Alamein front is the beginning of the offensive we have been waiting for (...)"*.

The 25th of October

At 2:30 (3:30 local time) Montgomery met Leese and Lumsden. He was in a good mood and, although there was a "duty" atmosphere, he listened calmly to the explanation of the situation, as it was known by his principle subordinates. Leese pointed out the progression of the crumbling of the resistance positions; Lumsden informed him about the delay of the 24th Armoured Brigade and about the embarrassment of the 8th Armoured Brigade. He also mentioned Gatehouse's request to desist and retreat behind the Miteiriya ridge with the tanks that had managed to break through as well (*Staffordshire Yeomanry* of the 8th Armoured Brigade). Montgomery, calm as usual, highlighted the inappropriateness of such a decision and, on the contrary, the necessity of continuing according to the plan. At that point, Lumsden asked him to personally talk with Gatehouse on the phone. Montgomery did not have any difficulties but:

"I discovered with horror that he (Gatehouse) was about 16 kilometres behind his armoured brigades. I talked to him with a determined tone and ordered him to move forward and hold the rein of combat. He had to make the way by fighting and guide his division from the head and not from the tail"[12].

To summarise, the initial orders were confirmed, but the 8th Armoured Brigade was only allowed to let the *Staffordshire Yeomanry* go its own way while the other two regiments would remain behind the ridge[13].

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[12] B. MONTGOMERY, *Memoirs, cit.*, p. 130. The reproach was unjustified because, as far as it seems, Gatehouse had temporarily left his tactical command post, behind the 8th Armoured Brigade, to reach the main one, so that he could be reached by phone whenever Montgomery wanted to talk to him.

[13] According to Gatehouse, who started the telephone conversation by saying: "*What the hell is going on?"* the conversation with Montgomery would have happened after the return of Lumsden from the meeting (C. BARNETT, *op. cit.*, p. 395).

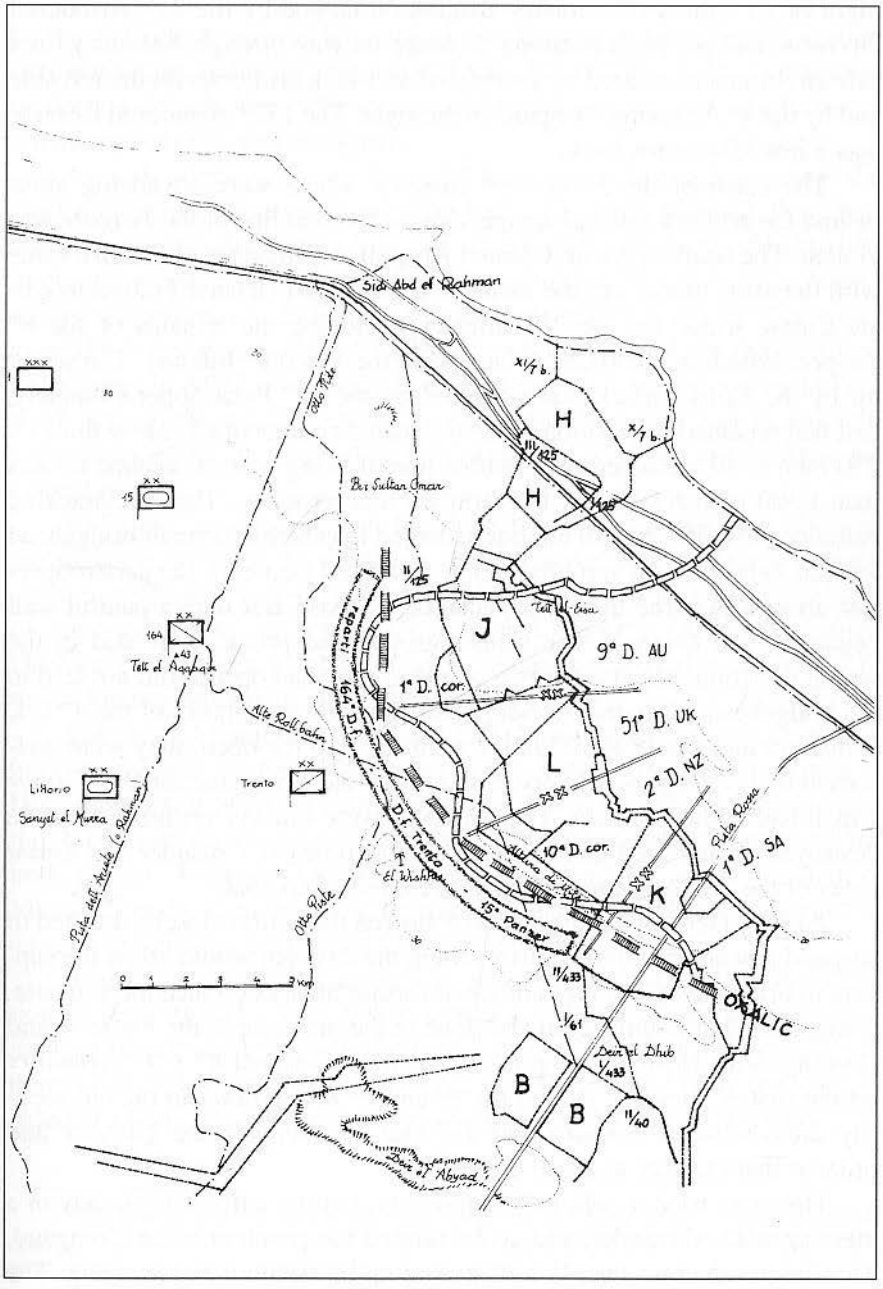
It is easy to imagine that Montgomery would not end the meeting without some decisive conclusion. He took Lumsden aside and told him that he wanted the armoured divisions to finally leave the minefield in order to manoeuvre. Under those conditions, any doubt or indecision would be fatal and "*if he or the commander of the 10th Armoured Division were not on the same wavelength, I would find someone else who was*"[14].

According to Montgomery, the clarification had an immediate effect, but, in reality, Gatehouse's divisions continued on their own way for some time, according to the previous orders. The British pressure on the positions harshly defended by the II and III/382nd Infantry and by the II and III/61st Infantry was quite strong, although not very well-coordinated, and inevitably led to success against the remaining 382nd German Infantry. Naturally, the mixed groups of the 15th *Panzer* and the *Littorio*, and, above all, the anti-tank batteries, were waiting at the breach for Lumsden's armoured columns, and the daylight suddenly crushed the hopes of the British tanks. (Sketch N. 46) The 1st Armoured Division, well supported by the Australian and the Scottish, got within one kilometre of the Kidney area. Some kilometres further south, there was an irregular deployment of the 10th Armoured Division: the 24th Armoured Brigade reported that it had reached its objective together with the 41st and the 47th *Royal Tanks*, leaving the 45th *Royal Tanks* and 11th Battalion KRRC as backup on the Miteiriya ridge; the 8th Armoured Brigade had occupied the area of El Wishka with *Staffordshire Yeomanry,* which was suddenly hit by the deadly fire of 88 and 75 ACIT guns, while the two other regiments were slowly getting closer (Lumsden's orders in these regards had not reached Custance yet). In the chaos that ensued, the two marching regiments turned back, followed by the *Staffordshire* with about fifteen surviving *Grant* and *Sherman* tanks. Shortly after, the entire brigade had gathered under the cover of the Miteiriya ridge.

The 9th Armoured Brigade was further south. Although isolated, it managed to overwhelm a company of the III/61st Infantry, but in the end was blocked by strenuous barrage and suppressive fire actions by the I and the II/46th Artillery of the *Trento*. It moved westwards and, although it endured a certain strain, it kept quite compact. Moreover, once it stopped in a slight depression between the Miteiriya ridge and Wishka, it came under the Italo-German anti-tank hammering fire. General Currie asked for a retreat in order to refuel, but Freyberg, who had met the 8th Armoured

[14] B. MONTGOMERY, *Memoirs, cit.*, p. 130.

Sketch N. 46
"THE LINE REACHED BY THE 10TH AND 30TH BRITISH CORPS AT DAWN ON 25 OCTOBER"



Brigade's retreat with little enthusiasm, did not allow it, fearing that Lumsden would halt his 9th Armoured Brigade at Miteiriya too.

No good news was coming from the 13th Corps either. During the night of 25th, the 131st Infantry Brigade, followed by the 22nd Armoured Division, had set forth meaning to make its way through *February*, in a safe environment created by a shield of anti-tank artilleries on the left side and by the 4th Armoured Brigade on the right. The 132nd Armoured Brigade was a few kilometres back.

The clash of the 5th and 6th *Queen's*, which were advancing close behind the artillery rolling barrage, against the thin line of the *Folgore* was violent. The death of Lieut. Colonel Ruspoli, commander of the task force with the same name, and the losses it endured, led General Frattini to create a new sector for the 28th Infantry, including the remains of the 8th Sappers Battalion, the II/28th Infantry and the VII/186th Infantry. The sector hit by the British attack was occupied by the 20th Paratrooper Company, that had regained its positions after the halted counterattack, as by the 21st: 250 men in all, detached on a double line of firing centres, against no less than 1,500 British soldiers. The struggle was ferocious. The two attacking battalions lost 350 men in all, but managed to establish a small bridgehead west of *February* and annihilate some advanced elements; the paratroopers lost about a hundred men, but managed to resist. But then a painful wait began for the *Queen's*. The sapper groups had probably headed in the wrong direction, because the two corridors they had opened did not lead to the bridgehead but to the outside. Therefore, when the tanks of the 4th C.L *Yeomanry* and the 1st *Royal Tanks* went out into the open, they were welcomed by the *Folgore* artillery, and units of the *Ariete* and the 21st *Panzer* which had rushed to help. The corridors were quickly obstructed by the destroyed or damaged tanks and, in a short time, 31 *Crusader* and *Grant* tanks of the 22nd Armoured Brigade were out of combat.

At 4:00 General Harding, who followed the action closely, decided to suspend any attempt until sunrise, when the daylight would allow the sappers to orientate themselves and open further breaches. Once the sun rose, it was clear that nothing could be done in the presence of the *Folgore*, and Harding, with Horrocks' approval, had the exhausted 4th *C.L Yeomanry* retreat east of *January*. He left the 1st and 5th *Royal Tanks* in the old security area between *January* and *February* to support the *Queen's* and ordered them to stay there all day.

Horrocks tried to talk to Montgomery, but the latter was already in a meeting with Alexander, and so he related the problem to de Guingand. The *Folgore* had no intention of giving up its position or retreating. The

only solution was to employ the 132nd Armoured Brigade in the battle as well, that is to say, all that remained of the 44th Infantry Division, or, alternatively, abandon that part of the front and attack Deir el Munassib instead, with the 50th Infantry Division (General J.S. Nichols), supported by the 4th Light Armoured Brigade. Horrocks himself preferred the second option because, in his opinion, even if the 132nd Infantry Brigade managed to open a breach, the 22nd Armoured Brigade, which had nearly lost a whole regiment, risked slaughter.

At mid-morning, Alexander met Montgomery in order to assess the situation together. Even though things had not gone as planned, there was reason to be satisfied. First of all, the reports about the battle, filed by the intelligence service at 19:00 on the 24th, stated that: "*it seems we achieved a complete surprise*". As for the development of battle, the 30th Corps had created a huge breach about 10 kilometres wide precisely in the direction of the heart of ACIT communications. The intention was to widen it to the north and south, but the harsh resistance the New Zealanders ran into called for caution. It would then be possible to go north and unblock the coastal road.

The 10th Corps had managed to cross the embarrassing minefield and the distance between its divisions seemed acceptable to face a serious counterattack. Fortunately, Alexander observed, Stumme was running out of armoured forces in actions of a limited extent[15]. The 1st Armoured Division could take advantage of such a mistake and increase the effect of the following Australian attack, keeping to its left.

The painful point concerned the 13th Corps, which had not been able to break through the harsh resistance of the *Folgore* in either the Qaret el Himeimat sector or in the central one. There was still the 21st *Panzer* and the *Ariete* that had not moved, and therefore the situation was equal for both parties. Horrocks proposed that organising an action in Deir el Munassib could then be acceptable, as the place seemed to be important enough to draw the 10th Italian Corps' attention.

It seemed that another move had generated results as well. A formation of eight British motor boats, directed to Ras el Daba to simulate a landing attempt, had been attacked at 23:00 on the 24th by a dozen CR.42s north of Ras el Kenays. It was repelled and lost a boat but, in any case, it reached its aim of keeping the *Trieste* and the 90th Light on the coast.

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[15] The news of Stumme's death was acknowledged in the evening of the 25th together with the news of Rommel's return, but it was not published in the army information bulletin until the 28th for security reasons regarding *Ultra* (H.F. HINSLEY, *op. cit.*, p. 440).

The final orders given by Montgomery to Leese and Lumsden, after a meeting held at the Headquarters of the 2nd New Zealand Infantry Division, were as follows. The 9th Australian had to attack that same night Hill 29 (Hill 28 according to the ACIT maps), a position which would allow them to get a sort of observation point over the surrounding territory, a few kilometres north of the Australian right flank, held by the II/125th Infantry. In the meantime, the 1st Armoured Division, reinforced with the 24th Armoured Brigade, would continue on its way beyond Kidney to Tell el Aqqaqir. The 10th Armoured Division would retreat with the 8th Armoured Division and the 133rd Motor Brigade, in order to reorganise. Freyberg was tasked with a particularly aggressive patrol action in order to gather clues of a possible retreat by the 21st Italian Corps.

After these decisions, Montgomery considered the situation of tanks presented by the intelligence service. Only taking the major armoured formations into consideration, at midday of the 25th the situation was as follows:

	situation			situation	
8th Army	23	25	ACIT	23	25
1st Armoured Div.	169	149	15th *Panzer*	112	37
10th Armoured Div.	280	167	*Littorio*	115	108
9th Armoured B.	122	92			
23rd Armoured B.	194	135			
7th Armoured Div.	214	191	21st *Panzer*	137	122
			Ariete	129	125
			Trieste	34	34
TOTAL	979	734		527	426

Everything was going well. And if the 21st *Panzer* and the *Ariete* remained in the south, it would go even better.

In the meantime, since the mid-morning, the 1st Armoured Divsion had been trying to widen the conquered salient, insisting on the Kidney area, and had made the 7th Motor Brigade flow behind the 2nd Armoured Brigade despite the furious artillery bombing by the 21st Corps. These efforts, of course, were hindered by ACIT but, in any case, von Thoma preferred to launch a series of local counterattacks where the danger of penetration had emerged. The II/8th *Panzer*, the IV and the LI/133rd Tank intervened in the Kidney sector: the two Italian battalions had 30% of their tanks hit and, among dead and wounded, they lost a battalion commander and four company commanders. The

XII/133rd Tank Battalion with the DLIV Self-propelled Group and one German armoured group clashed against the New Zealand sector.

In short, the responses against the 20th Australian Brigade were disjointed both in time and location; the Australians, in their part, scored some single actions against the 2/13th and 2/17th Battalions. The 2nd Motor Brigade suffered some serious losses caused by artillery. The 2nd Armoured Brigade was attacked while it was standing still and lost (but also managed to destroy) many armoured vehicles. The 24th Armoured Brigade resisted by standing its ground. In the afternoon, all ambitions were halted. One thing was sure: despite the right or wrong use von Thoma made of his backup forces, the 10th Corps could not make its way through. Perhaps on the following day, after the planned night attacks by the Australians on Hill 28 and by the Scots for the elimination of *Aberdeen*, *Stirling* and *Nairn*, circumstances would turn out to their advantage.

In the late evening, between 23:00 and 24:00, the 26th Australian Infantry Brigade and three Scottish brigades left the departure bases. A few kilometres further south, the 24th Armoured Brigade, which had moved east of the Miteiriya ridge, began a long turn to join the 1st Armoured Division. Further south, the fight for Deir el Munassib was underway.

The area of Deir el Munassib was garrisoned by the 187th *Folgore* Infantry, concentrated in its south western part. The IV Paratroopers was stationed in a so-called security area, but with defensive tasks; two of its companies were facing the southern edge of the depression, the third was facing east. The IX Battalion was supported by *February* and was holding the strongholds of the resistance position. The II Battalion was to the north (Sketch N. 47).

We do not know the British operational plan exactly. The fact is that the attack was divided into subsequent phases. The first attempt took place in the mid-evening and was conducted by the 4/8th *Hussars* of the 4th Armoured Light Brigade, preceded by foot sappers. It was directed toward the southern border of the depression and it was clearly destined to fail. Due to the day light, the sappers had been quickly scattered and the tanks, proceeding in two columns, designated to attack the 11th Company (about 100 men with three 47 pieces) and the 12th Company (120 men with three 47 pieces) respectively, were gathered in such compact formations that in less than an hour the *Folgore* anti-tank guns and artillery managed to halt the action and cause the enemy to retreat and abandon about twenty damaged tanks on the battlefield.

At 21:00, the 69th Infantry Brigade, supported by tanks, showed up after an intense preparation fire. The VI *Green Howard* approached, hidden by a smokescreen, and burst into the heart of the stronghold, but the tireless and aggressive resistance of the surviving firing centres was enough to strain and to slow down the penetration, so that it was halted at about 4:00 in front of the trench of the company command post, defended by eight paratroopers. The break allowed for the intervention of a small reserve battalion and the constitution of a back line. The V *East Yorkshire,* on the other hand, headed for the 12th Company, but it did not even manage to scratch the advanced centres and, at about 1:00, after it had lost 150 soldiers, was forced to give up the attempt.

That night, the historical diary of the XX Corps concluded with a phrase which summarised the physical and moral condition of the troops: *"Everyone is doing his best against the action of the enemy, who insists violently with overwhelming equipment and weapons"*. But there was also some good news: in the late afternoon, Rommel had reached the ACIT Headquarters.

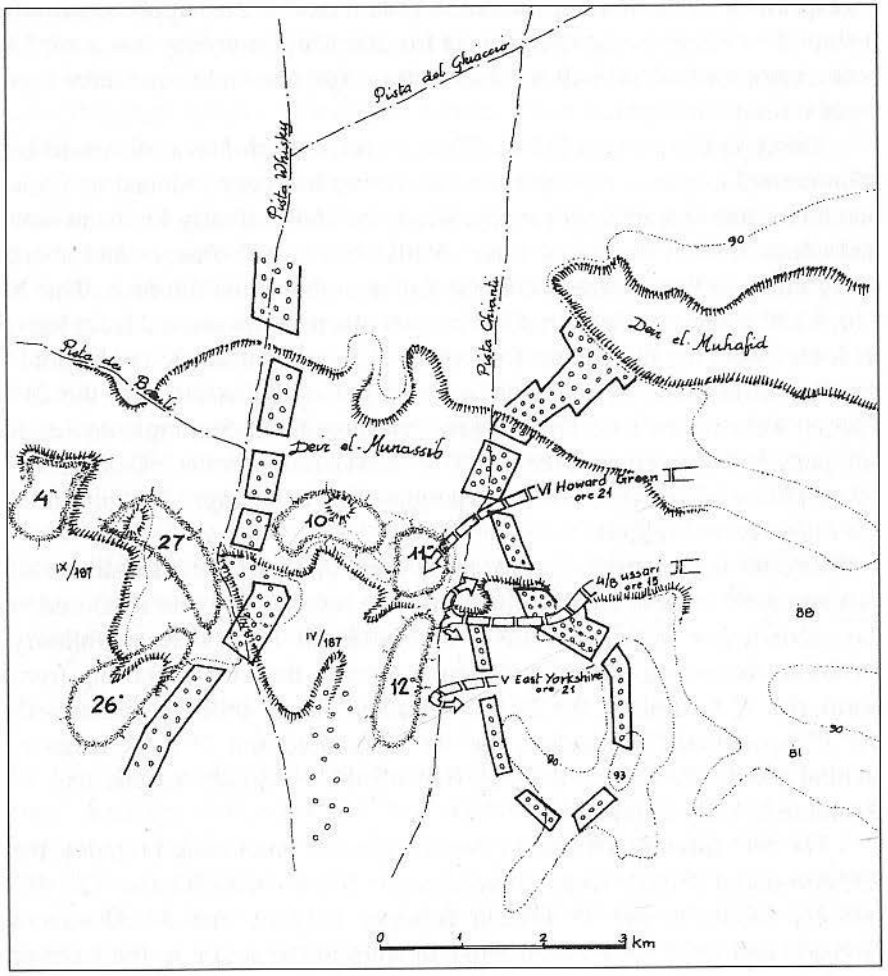
2. The Return of Rommel

At about 11:00 on the 25th, Rommel landed at Ciampino airport. General von Rintelen was waiting for him and informed him of the Egyptian events, before Rommel's plane took off again. The most important fact was represented by the breach - limited, for the moment - in the central part of the *Trento* and the 164th Infantry Division sector. It was a nasty business, but it was one of the unforeseen events of the battle. There was another question Rommel was interested in: how much fuel was there left? He was frozen by the answer: ACIT seemed to have only 3 units of fuel (that is to say, for about 300 kilometres) available!

> "I was deeply embittered", he later wrote, "because before my departure there were still at least eight units for the Egyptian and Libyan armies, and it was already insufficient, compared to the 30 units that were indispensable. Experience had demonstrated that one unit of fuel was needed for just one day of battle; without it the army would be paralyzed and would not be able to react to enemy movements"[16].

[16] B. LIDDELL HART, *The Rommel Papers, cit.*, p. 305. The calculations of Rommel were obviously based on the *army's* fuel units, and not on the hundred kilometre journey of a single vehicle.

Sketch N. 47
"THE SECOND FIGHT AT DEIR EL MUNASSIB
(25-26 OCTOBER)"



With the dramatic hours that forced the abandonment of the battle of Alam el Halfa in mind, Rommel probably felt that the events were drawing to a close: *"Frightened that we might be forced to struggle through this battle with not too much hope of success"*, he remembered, *"I crossed the Mediterranean in my Storch and I reached my command post at dusk"*[17].

[17] *Ibid*. To be precise, he flew in a Heinkel to Crete, where General von Waldau put a modern Dornier 217 at his disposal to reach Qasaba, in Egypt. He then took his Storch.

He then learned the details about Stumme's death, whose body had been found in the afternoon. Soon after, von Thoma and Westphal provided him with an update about the battle. He then started to count the losses, especially in the northern sector, and to examine the supply situation. It should be remembered that, during his absence, the enemy had sunk 13 boats, among which steamboats and motor ships, one tanker and three tugboats on route to Africa.

The XXI Corps, still led by Gloria, even though Navarini would be soon taking his place, reported that the *Trento* had been reduced to a few battalions and two artillery groups, while the 164th Infantry Division now had about 70% of the initial force available. The 15th *Panzer* had about thirty tanks at that moment and the *Littorio* about one hundred. The X Corps had a new commander, General Nebbia, recently arrived from Italy. Its losses were not high, apart from the *Folgore*, and it seemed to be holding the battle quite well. The losses suffered by the *Ariete* and the 21st *Panzer* were minor too. The *Folgore* had lost about 5 companies (each company had an average force of 120 soldiers), however the official report by an officer of the Army Corps Headquarters was saying: "*The morale of the Folgore: marvellous!*"

Regarding the enemy forces, there were three Infantry divisions and two armoured ones in the front line plus two Infantry and one armoured in the second, just in front of the *Trento* and the 164th German Infantry Division. According to the intelligence service, they were, starting from north, the 9th Australian, the 2nd New Zealand, the 5th Indian together with the 7th Armoured (2 brigades), the 10th Armoured and 1st Tank Brigade. Behind them, there were the 51st British, the 1st South African and 1st Armoured, ready to intervene.

The 50th Infantry Division (two British and one Greek brigade), the 23rd Armoured Brigade were in the centre, in front of the *Bologna*. The 44th Infantry Division, the 1st French Infantry Brigade, the 8th Armoured Division and the 4th Armoured Brigade were in the south, in the front of the *Brescia* and the *Folgore*. The reconstruction was not exact, but it was enough to threaten the northern sector. In short, the absolute superiority of the enemy was confirmed in all areas: aviation, artillery, armoured vehicles, as well as in fuel and ammunition[18]. It seemed probable that Montgomery would be determined to impose an attrition battle, as he knew it would be unbearable for ACIT.

[18] It was calculated that during the artillery preparation on the 23rd there had been almost 130,000 total shots fired.

The eternal problem of supplies was the main issue. Now, at the beginning of a decisive confrontation, it was really distressing. The army could rely only on 1.5 days of fuel. There was a bit less in the area of Tobruk-Bengasi, that is to say, not terribly far from El Daba, but not that close either; it was still about 600 and 1,000 kilometers of road with two drawbacks: the expenditure of fuel relative to the round-trip and the long exposure to aircraft attacks. The coastal navigation and the Tobruk-Sidi Abd el Rahman railroad could certainly be useful, but their limits were quite clear.

This lack of availability was an unacceptable hamper, because the mobility of the armoured units during the battle was seriously compromised, to the point of permitting simple local counterattacks with the reserve units at hand. And if this were not enough, there was also a serious shortage of ammunition. Rommel learned, quite dismayed, that in the night of 24th Stumme had *"forbidden"* opening fire against the British departure bases in order to save ammunition and, consequently, *"the enemy was allowed to take control of a great part of the minefields and overwhelm the defence with relatively light losses"*[19]. Frankly, nothing shows that such a drastic prohibition had ever been imposed. There is no doubt that the fear for inadequate provisions and the orders concerning accurate firing might have conditioned the artillery commanders in a certain way, but it is likely that the interruption in the transmission network and the British bombing on the formation of the ACIT artillery were a much more serious problem.

The 26th of October

The beginning of the offensive had until this point focused on three areas: Kidney, El Wishka and the Munassib Depression. There was also another one: Hill 28 south of Bir Sultan Omar, the objective assigned to the 9th Australian Infantry Division as Hill 29, which we will now indicate as Hill 28, in order to avoid confusion. Such a trigonometric point will soon become a key position on the battlefield, even if some historians will incorrectly identify it with the small Kidney Depression.

In the morning of the 26th, at about 5 o'clock, Rommel came back to the command post vehicle, to listen to the news. And there was much news, especially regarding the hot sectors.

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[19] B. LIDDELL HART, *The Rommel Papers, cit.*, p. 305. The bulletin issued in the same evening of the 25th underlined a phrase: *"An immediate, fundamental improvement of the supply of ammunition and fuel is needed. Therefore it is required urgently and it constitutes a premise for a victorious resistance to quite a long attack"*.

Hill 28 was certainly the most important action among the ones planned by the 8th Army in those circumstances. Morshead had already thought of such a thing on his own, and that is why Montgomery's order did not surprise him at all and the organization of the tactical action was thus much easier. In addition to this, in the early hours of the 25th, the Australians happened to be really lucky; they captured two high-rank German officers who had imprudently approached the enemy lines. They were the commander of the 125th Infantry and that of the II Battalion of the same regiment, in possession of marked topographic maps. The commander of the II/125th Infantry, speaking deliberately, confirmed what had already been singled out by the Intelligence Service: his battalion occupied Hill 28, the I was blocking the road and the railway, the III was stationed near the coast. What is more, the path through the minefields in the area was assured.

The task of conquering the objective was entrusted to the 26th Infantry Brigade. General Whitehead had only two battalions available (2/24th and 2/48th), as the third one had been detached to the Division Headquarters. As compensation, he received the 40th Tank Battalion with thirty *Valentines* and considerable fire support: three Australian field artillery regiments plus two more field and an additional heavy artillery as reinforcement. Aside from the counter-battery firing of the higher level artillery, these six regiments had to fire 14,508 25-pounder shells and 1,066 5.5-inch shells on the target. Naturally, there was a separate task reserved to the *Royal Air Force:* its *Wellingtons* had to launch 115 tons of bombs into the battle zone.

To summarize: not many mines, superior fire power, a good ratio of infantry forces. The attack *had* to succeed. In fact it succeeded, after a quick and bloody hand-to-hand battle. The 26th Brigade had 56 dead and 256 wounded and missing, the division had captured 173 Germans from the 125th Infantry and 67 Italian soldiers from the *Trento* (remainder of the I/62nd Infantry) in total.

Things at Kidney went relatively well for the Scots too, but not completely and the price to pay was much higher. The 51st Infantry Division had to occupy the three objective of *Aberdeen, Stirling and Nairn* once and for all and, in so doing, materialise the reaching of *Oxalic*. The I *Gordon* of the 154th Infantry Brigade had been blocked on the first of them, i.e. Kidney's eastern zone, since the first day. Although it was supported by a squadron of *Valentines* and in spite of the repeated attempts that began at 23:00, it was already enough that it managed to stay where it was. The V *Black Watch* of the 153rd Infantry Brigade had been directed to *Stirling*. It

slowly got closer and was surprised to find the position manned by dead soldiers only. Moreover, at daybreak on the 26th, it realised that a German unit was in the trenches not more than 50 meters away. Regarding *Nairn*, the VII *Argyll and Sutherland* of the 154th Infantry Brigade had the most difficult work cut out for them and had to conquer the position with gradual and hard bayonet charges and high losses.

As we know, the match was lost by the British in Deir el Munassib. The two brigades of the 44th Infantry Division had lost about 700 soldiers.

This is the outline that Rommel managed to gather from the intelligence about the night news. The command of the XXI Armed Corps had feared the fall of Hill 28 the night before and ordered the XI/7th *Bersaglieri* to move from its coastal detachment south-east of Sidi Abd el Rahman to Bir Sultan Omar. The action aiming at conquering back the positions lost by the II/125th was entrusted to the *Littorio* and 15th *Panzer* units with a strong artillery support. "*Unfortunately*", commented Rommel, who decided to observe the struggle, "*the attack went on slowly. The British put up a desperate resistance*"[20]. The *Royal Air Force* formations continued bombing the battlefield at one-hour intervals.

Rommel decided to gather more forces to the north, by having the *Kasta* group come from the extreme south of the front, the 580th Recce Group from Matruh (where it would be replaced by the 3rd Recce Group of the 21st *Panzer*), the 90th Light from the El Daba zone, the 21st *Panzer* and a tactical group of the *Ariete* from the southern sector.

In the meantime, while the interventions by units of the 15th *Panzer* and the *Littorio* were keeping the situation blocked between Hill 28 and Kidney (the II/8th *Panzer*, II and IV/133rd Tank Battalion and the DLIV Self-propelled Group) and in El Wishka (the 1/8th *Panzer*, the XII/133rd Tank Battalion, the DLIV Self-propelled Group and the XXXV/12th *Bersaglieri*), the Infantry of the XXI Corps, whose command had been taken by Navarini again on that same day, was re-establishing a satisfactory line of resistance almost behind the Miteiriya ridge.

Strain was being felt, though. At the end of 26th, the dead reached 307 soldiers, the wounded 919, and 2,249 were missing, mostly Italians. There were 187 M13 and M14 and 121 Pzkw III and IV (including 65 Type Special) tanks still efficient. The ACIT night bulletin was eloquent:

> "The troops are showing some signs of exhaustion. It is not only caused by the intense artillery fire and by the air superiority of the enemy, but

[20] E. ROMMEL, *op. cit.*, p. 254.

also by the fact that many Italo-German soldiers, who have been staying in Northern Africa for more than 18 months, can no longer fully endure fatigue".

Among the major losses of that day, there was also the sinking of the tanker boat *Proserpina* (2,500 tons of fuel) and of the *Tergestea* (about 3,000 tons of ammunition and 1,000 tons of goods):

"The situation of fuel", the bulletin informed, "is strained as it has never been before (...). The problem of ammunition forces us to further economising, which is a severe trial for the troops, considering the high consumption of the ammunition by the British".

And Cavallero wrote down in his diary: *"The problem now is to see what to do to scrape something together"*.

While for Rommel the day confirmed the painful impression of a struggle without any concrete hopes, for Montgomery it was a day of profound reflection. The offensive of the 8th Army seemed to have reached a dead point, as the attempt of the infantry to break through had failed and the armoured troops were not able to surpass the barrage of the anti-tank cannons. From approximate calculations, the British losses doubled those of the Italians and Germans put together: 6,140 among dead, wounded and missing versus about 3,700, and 300 medium tanks out of combat versus 150[21].

These numbers were not alarming because, in the end, the human losses were not excessive and Rommel (Montgomery now knew he had taken the command again) remained with 400 tanks while the 8th Army had 900 efficient ones, plus another 100 tanks of the 10th Corps being repaired.

Then there were also some tactical possibilities, but the main commanders were not at all convinced about them. Freyberg was asking himself whether his New Zealanders could manage to carry out other *"important attacks;"* Wimberley had lost 2,000 soldiers, infantrymen for the most part; Leese made a significant comment: *"we were very close to losing control of the battle"*[22]. As compensation, Montgomery did not have the

[21] M. CARVER reported a similar assessment of the ACIT losses issued by the Intelligence of the 8th Army, which does not seem true: the Axis would have lost 61,000 soldiers, 530 tanks, 340 field guns, 90 88 guns, 720 anti-tank guns! The same author comments: *"If it had been real, the 8th Army would no longer have found an enemy along its way"* (*op. cit.*, p. 242).

[22] L. PHILLIPS, *El Alamein*, Milan, Garzanti, 1964, p. 209.

slightest doubt about winning. The break through had not occurred and therefore the only thing to do was to find the best way to make it happen.

The centre of gravity for the main effort had to remain to the north, considering that the attack of the 13th Corps - as much as it had been planned as subsidiary, it had the ability to determine success - turned out to be insufficient to overcome the *Folgore,* and considering the risk that its implementation could even be harmful to the 30th Corps. It was thus worth renouncing the original plan, assigning a static task to Horrocks and recovering the 7th Armoured Division.

Leese had to complete the conquest of *Oxalic* for the time being and immediately consolidate his position there, without being forced to face any great conflict with ACIT. He then had to support the next resumption of the offensive. Lumsden was responsible for the security of the bridgehead, built up by the 30th Corps, and had to improve his own settlement beyond the Kidney area, towards *Skinflint*. Horrock was to disengage the 7th Armoured Division, left with 70 *Grants*, 27 *Crusades* and 50 *Stuarts*. On the basis of this, Montgomery gave orders to the commanders of the 30th and 10th Corps regarding what might be implemented during the night of the 27th.

But it was not enough. After long hours of reflection, in the evening, he called Leese. He decided on a pause, to rearrange the forces differently. New reserves were needed to carry out the offensive to the north, where the results of the Australian action during the night of the 26th suggested the possibility of a decisive move. "*If I could have reached the back of the enemy who kept the coastal salient*", he explained later on, "*I would have annihilated or captured a big German group or perhaps I would have opened a line to operate along the coast*"[23]. The first task was to recover the New Zealanders.

In the meantime, Freyberg and Pienaar had another task to accomplish: complete and enlarge the occupation of the Miteiriya ridge. The attacks of the 4th New Zealand Brigade and of the 2nd South African, usually well supported by artillery, hit the II and III/61st Infantry and the II/382nd German Infantry's positions heavily. Between 19:00 and 21:00, the renewed intensity of the British fire forced the *Trento* battalions and the 164th Infantry Division to withdraw to poorly arranged positions, suffering many losses. The counterattack conducted by a mixed armoured group had not brought any concrete results due to both the consolidation of the enemy and yet another air raid.

[23] B. MONTGOMERY, *Da El Alamein al fiume Sangro, cit.*, p. 30.

While the fighting was still going on, Leese had returned to his headquarters and was gathering his division commanders and illustrating the situation. It was necessary to maintain the initiative and keep ACIT under pressure, otherwise the battle would be useless. "*For some days*", he said, "*the Australians had to attract as many enemy forces as they could, by threatening to surround the coastal salient and open the access to the coastal road behind the minefields*"[24]. This would allow the retreat of the units designated to create a new attack mass, from the front, that is to say: the 1st and the 10th Armoured Divisions, the 2nd New Zealand Infantry Division and the 9th Armoured Brigade. After being recovered, these divisions would be resupplied and rearranged quickly. Such a recovery would, in the beginning, be restricted to the New Zealanders and facilitated by the Australians in charge of distracting Rommel to the north, as well as by the inevitable changes in the responsibilities for the front, with a general movement northwards.

In other words, the 9th Australian had to concentrate in a narrow part of Hill 28, leaving the 24th Brigade between Tell el Elisa and the sea; the 51st Scottish Division had to move to the 20th Australian Brigade sector. The Headquarters of the 2nd New Zealand, together with the 151st Infantry Brigade of the 50th Infantry Division and the New Zealand artillery assumed the defence in the sector of the 51st *Highlander*. The 1st South African would replace the New Zealanders in the northern sector of the Miteiriya ridge and the 4th Indian was entrusted to the 30th Corps, occupying the South African sector. The movements had to come to an end by dawn on the 28th, that is to say, in two night time periods. Consequently, the Australian attack had to start that night.

Aside from an objection by Pienaar, abandoned due to Freyberg's malicious intervention[25], the plan of moving 60,000 soldiers and thousands of vehicles in 36 hours had been accepted without problems.

The 27th of October

That night, General Briggs wanted to move his 1st Armoured Division beyond *Oxalic*. To open the way to Kidney, it was necessary to occupy two

[24] L. PHILLIPS, *op. cit.*, p. 212.

[25] Pienaar stated he could not execute the order due to the lack of means of transportation. Freyberg, assured by the Chief of Staff about the availability of New Zealand trucks, commented in a weak voice: "*Good! I will now sort him out! He doesn't like to accept other people's help*". And asked Pienaar: "*Are the means of transportation the only thing you are worried about, Dan? Haven't you got any other worries?*" "*No*", answered Pienaar, "*I haven't got enough transportation, that's all*". "*We can help you out then*", offered Freyberg with a smile, "*I am ready to supply you with all the vehicles you need*" (L. PHILLIPS, *op. cit.*, p. 213).

positions, one north-west and another south-west, conventionally called *Woodcock* and *Snipe*. He thought he would conquer them with the 7th Motorized Brigade (led by Gen. Bosville); then he would use the positions as a departure base for the 2nd and the 24th Armoured Brigades (Sketch N. 48).

Air photos indicated the presence of barbed wire obstacles and anti-tank guns. It was then necessary to accept the possibility of enemy armoured responses. After various discussions about the exact topographical location of the objectives, considering that they were simply two pieces of desert, the operation started before midnight, following a massive artillery rolling barrage. The II *King's Royal Rifle Corps* with one battery of the 76th Anti-tank Artillery was heading to *Woodcock,* while the II Battalion of the *Rifle Brigade* with a 6-pounder battery was moving to *Snipe*.

The first objective had been missed completely because, once the weak resistance of the advanced elements of the I/382nd German Infantry had been surpassed, the KRRC Battalion, that had assumed an all around defensive position in the darkness, found itself south of *Woodcock* in the day light and in quite an unlucky position.

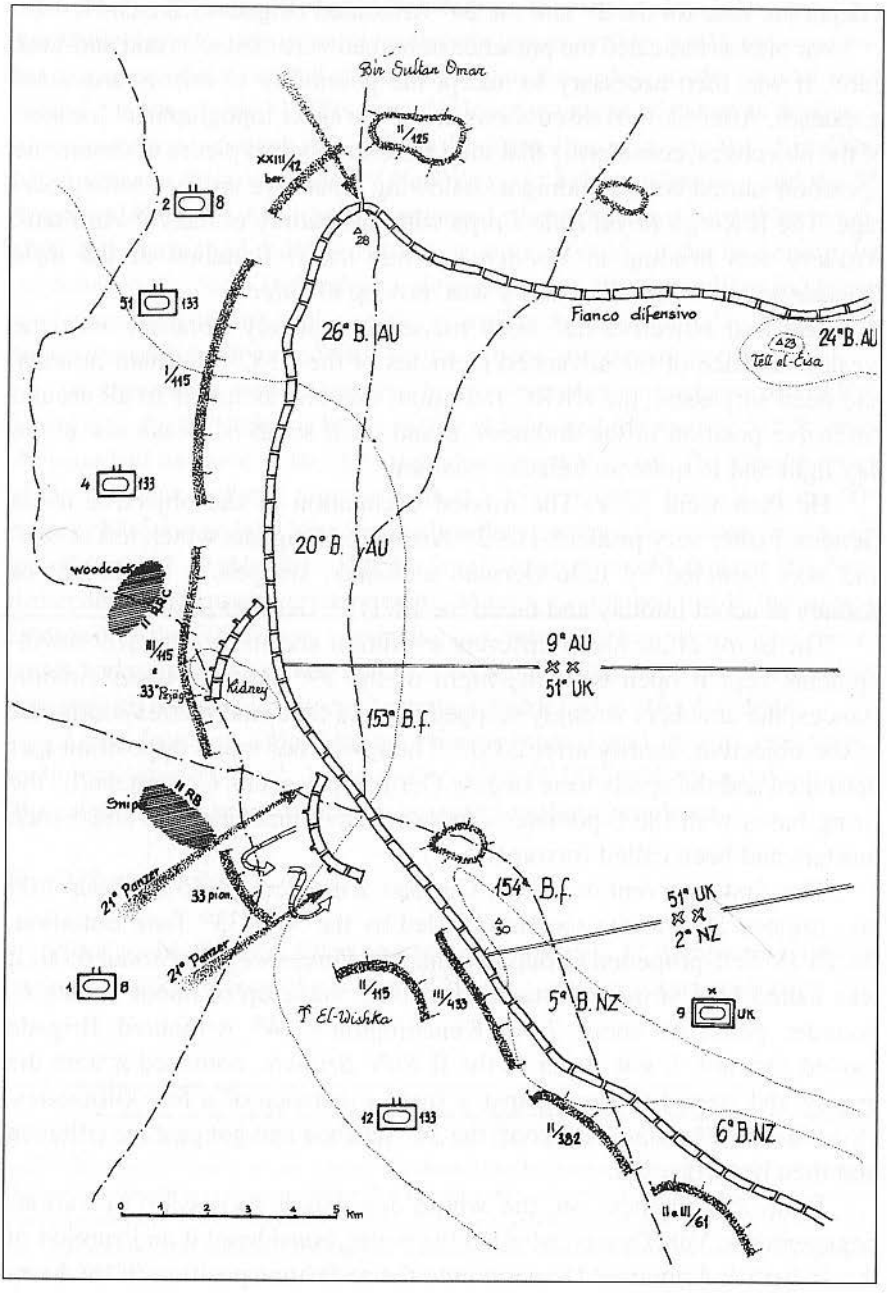
He then went back. The missed occupation of the objective made General Fisher very prudent. His 2nd Armoured Brigade, which left at 6:00 and was harassed by Italo-German elements, stopped at the height of Kidney at about midday and faced the III/115th German Infantry.

The *Snipe* affair had a different evolution and the subsequent developments kept it open until the night of the 29th. Also in these circumstances, the attackers wrongly stopped about a thousand metres south-east of the objective, shortly after 23:00. There was not much opposition met until then and the spoils were twenty German prisoners. Consequently, the firing bases with the 6-pounder cannons, heavy machineguns and 3 inch mortars had been called forward.

The first intervention of the German armoured group at about 4:00 was useless. So was the second one, led by the XII/133rd Tank Battalion, the DLIV Self-propelled Group and the 33rd *Panzerjaeger* at about 6:00. It was halted by a strong anti-tank formation, made up of about twenty 6-pounder guns. At about 7:00, Kenchington's 24th Armoured Brigade moved forward. It got closer to the II *Rifle Brigade*, confused it with the enemy and started to fire against it from a distance of a few kilometres. Once the mistake was sorted out, the 24th reached and got past the riflemen and then headed south.

From that moment on, the whole day was a succession of various engagements. Von Thoma, who led the battle, considered it an irruption of the 1st British Armoured Division onto the resistance position (if the hasty

Sketch N. 48
"THE ATTACK OF THE 1ST BRITISH ARMOURED DIVISION ON *WOODSTOCK* AND *SNIPE* (26-27 OCTOBER)"



defensive line in that place could be called as such). This irruption, having put most of the III/115th Infantry in a difficult position, was at first stopped by the ACIT artillery and then by a series of engagements carried out by the 15th *Panzer* and the *Littorio*. These engagements culminated in a counterattack launched in the early afternoon by the ever more strained II/8th *Panzer* and IV/133rd Tank with a self-propelled battery. To sum up, the perception of the situation at the DAK Headquarters was that the 7th Motor Brigade was holding on to its positions just west of Kidney, but in a precarious position because its two battalions were isolated; the 24th Armoured Brigade had been repelled with many tanks out of combat; the 2nd Armoured Brigade gathered at the height of Kidney and the 51st Infantry Division remained well organised in defence.

In Briggs' opinion, notwithstanding the 200 tanks engaged, the events did not satisfy expectations, since only one of the two key areas planned on the way to Kidney had been reached, though neither topographically nor firmly. Moreover, one of the two armoured brigades had given up. As compensation, the II Rifle Brigade behaved magnificently and the wear on the Axis armoured forces was evident.

Now, in the mid morning, the radio interceptions gave Briggs some alarming news: The 21st *Panzer* was consolidating west of Kidney. He considered a fight inevitable. Therefore, the 2nd Armoured Brigade was instructed to get closer to the *Rifles*. As it had already happened to the 24th, the unlucky battalion was also fired on by the 2nd Brigade by mistake. Once the mistake was cleared up, though with some difficulty, the biggest counterattack of the day took place.

Still that morning, the XI/7th *Bersaglieri* attacked Hill 28 and conquered its western margins at the cost of 50 dead and 150 wounded out of 450 soldiers. The general situation in the sector was relatively better, while the movements ordered by Rommel the day before concluded: the 90th Light had reached the south of Sidi Abd el Rahman with the bulk of its units; the 21st *Panzer*, except one battalion of the 104th *Panzergrenadiere* and one company of *Panzerjaeger* at the disposal of the XX Corps, arrived west of El Wishka. One tactical group of the *Ariete,* made up of IX/132nd Tank Battalion and the VI Self-propelled Group, was stationed west of Kidney. All this led Rommel to consider the possibility of attempting a decisive action against the main enemy salients at Hill 28 and Kidney, in order to "*re-establish the resistance line everywhere*". The first objective was assigned to the 90th Light together with a tactical group of the *Littorio*, the second to all the efficient forces of the DAK and the XX Corps available in that sector.

At 15:00, about twenty *Stukas,* escorted by fighters, headed towards the British positions, but they were soon faced by 16 American *Kittyhawks* and 24 British *Hurricanes*, and were quickly forced to go back. The beginning was not good. Von Sponeck led the action in the Hill 28 sector with the 155th Infantry, the XXIII/12th *Bersaglieri* and the LI/133rd Tank. There were signs of success, but soon the intervention of 90 *Royal Air Force* bombers and a terrible barrage and interdiction fire annihilated any hope.

To clear the area around Kidney, von Randow employed the 1/5th *Panzerregiment*, the I/104th *Panzergrenadiere* of the 21st Armoured and one tactical group of the *Littorio* (the remainder of the XII/133rd Tank and the DLIV Self-propelled Group); the *Ariete* Division task group followed. Even this attempt was a complete failure. An even greater barrage fire halted the advance and threw the formation into disorder. The long range duel between the tanks was won by the *Shermans* and *Grants*. "*Generally speaking, there is not much chance of success for a tank attack on terrain where the enemy has organised a defence; but we could not do anything else*", Rommel confessed bitterly[26]. By that time, the commitment of the precious armoured units was to be drawn on in order to set up some kind of defensive line. This was all Rommel could say to von Thoma when he reported on the outcome at 20:00.

To draw a complete picture of the XXI Corps, something must be said about the attacks that had been resumed by the New Zealanders and South Africans during the afternoon, in the south-west margin of the K pocket. Although it was all a matter of tactical local actions, in the end the II/382nd was in a very bad state. The II and III/61st Infantries were merged into a single unit due to the losses suffered and were almost annihilated. A company of the 61st Infantry desperately kept fighting, connected on its right side with the II/433rd German Infantry, but without any support on its left side. The II/382nd Infantry was ordered to move patrols toward the aforesaid company.

The same evening, the *Delease* historical diary reported that "*today's enemy attacks in the northern sector produced a slight inflection in our lines in the area a few kilometres north of El Wishka*". The diary of the XX Corps spoke of a "*struggle with alternating events*" and declared that the materials lost by the *Littorio* amounted to 16 tanks, 4 self-propelled and 5 88 pieces, and concluded that the physical conditions and morale of the troops "*remain quite shaken by the violent enemy action*".

[26] B. Liddell Hart, *The Rommel Papers, cit.*, p. 310.

It is useless to deny that the seriousness of the operational situation was increasing. The position of the resistance was crumbling, and while the infantry boldly stood their ground, in some cases in an unbelievable way, the armoured units were not able to cut the enemy's penetrations. The defence in the Kidney area and west of the Miteiriya ridge seemed unsteady; on Hill 28 the Australians conquered a local advantage which caused trouble for the formations aligned in the coastal sector. Each attempt at a counterattack was doomed to failure due to the superior power of the enemy aviation and the artillery. The levels of ammunition and fuel supplies decreased exponentially. There was only 1.7 *unfoc (ammunition consumption unit)* in the ACIT area and another one between Tobruk and Bengasi. It was impossible to count on the 1.3 *unfoc* in Tripoli. The fuel available was sufficient for about a day and a half and, considering a daily supply of 60 tons, the provisions would last until the 31st, that is to say four more days! The flow of the 21st *Panzer* northwards had brought relatively heavy consumption and it was difficult to send it to the Qattara Depression, should it be necessary.

That evening Rommel sent an S.O.S. to Rome and to the Headquarters of the Führer, but without excessive hope. It was clear that Montgomery would go on destroying ACIT piece by piece, taking advantage of its immobility and exploiting the ample superiority margin in forces, materials and resources.

Goering had reached Rome and, on that very day, at *Palazzo Venezia,* he had a clarifying conversation with Kesselring. The latter expressed some doubts about *"the attitude of Marshal Rommel which he deemed indecisive"*. To tell the truth, such a judgement appears more biased than unfair, considering that there is no proof of Rommel's indecisiveness. Goering asserted that *"there is no reason to think the armoured army would give up if the supplies arrive on time"*. Everybody agreed and each - Cavallero, Goering, Kesselring and even Mussolini - promised something[27]. Nobody touched on the idea that the supplies of ammunition and fuel, even reaching the ACIT depots in great quantity, would not be enough to grant victory, given the great lack of aircraft, tanks, cannons, vehicles and men. And they probably would not even be enough to grant a quick retreat and preserve the efficiency of ACIT. However, nobody would have dared to speak of retreat.

At Hitler's Headquarters, where the attention was directed towards Stalingrad, the request to send the 47th Infantry to Egypt, which was

[27] Cavallero's Diary, 27/10/1942.

detached in Crete, was not granted: due to the deficiency of airborne transports, ACIT could only receive either supplies or soldiers, not both. In any case, there was nothing to be done for the 47th Infantry as it had not been reorganised yet.

The 28th of October

At 7:00, Montgomery met with Leese and Lumsden. The events that happened during the night were not brilliant at all. For many hours the conflicting communications coming from the burning area of Kidney alternated with radio silence. It was not possible to reconstruct the events until dawn.

The 1st Armoured Division had to be replaced with the 10th on 28 October. As a preliminary action, Gatehouse ordered his 133rd Infantry Brigade (General Lee) to relieve the 7th Motor Brigade at night and to complete or rather conquer *Woodcock* and replace the II *Rifle Brigade*. But probably the organisation was too hasty and so many things went wrong. It is necessary to say that the continuous fights in the Kidney area and the difficulties in orientation created a lot of confusion (there are many uncertainties also in the German and Italian historical diaries), but the fact is that when General Lee reached the place he found himself in unknown territory. He did not receive any trustworthy indications from the 1st Armoured Division or from the 10th, or even from the 51st *Highlanders*. Lumsden and Gatehouse worsened the circumstances and convinced Lee that his superiors were kept under pressure by Montgomery. The brigade should not expect any help. It was enough to *"go on"*. Soon after sunrise, the 8th and the 24th Armoured Brigades would arrive in place[28].

Lee sent the three battalions of the *Royal Sussex,* at about 21:30, before the moon had risen. The V, headed towards *Snipe*, had taken a wrong road and stopped, entrenching itself in a place that had nothing to do with the objective. The IV, which moved out late because of a series of difficulties, ran into a skirmish with... the I *Gordon*, stationed at *Aberdeen*, exactly in the direction of the march. Once the mistake was clarified, the battalion went on. It almost lost one of its companies in a chance meeting with an armoured enemy unit and finally, at 4:30, reached the eastern margin of *Woodcock* and pushed back a part of the German I/104th Infantry. Unfortunately, at daybreak, a sudden and determined counterattack by

[28] L. PHILLIPS, *op. cit.*, pp. 242-243.

units of the 15th *Panzer* and the *Littorio* in place surprised and defeated the IV *Sussex*, which lost 400 men among dead, wounded and missing.

In the meantime, the *Yorkshire Dragoons*, the motorized battalion of the 2nd Armoured Division, could not stand up to the blow of the tactical group of the 21st *Panzer*. Two tank regiments of the same 2nd Armoured Brigade received the order to slowly withdraw, and such an order was bitterly commented on by the infantry. Further south, the II *Sussex* was literally nailed down in Kidney by Italo-German fire. The II *Rifle Brigade*, which was considered lost in the beginning, managed to disengage on its own.

Montgomery considered the hard struggles of those days and "*began to realise the need to be prudent due to the amount of losses suffered*". Although he understood that the breach had to be executed on the front of the 30th Corps, "*in that moment I did not know where it would be exactly*"[29]. Anyway, something was clear: it was useless to go on in the Kidney sector. That is why the 10th Armoured Division was able to keep the positions occupied in that sector and be replaced, at the right moment, with units of 30th Corps, while the 1st Armoured Division was quickly reorganising.

The tactical action decided for the 9th Australian seemed to be suitable for favourable development. Montgomery talked about it with Freyberg in the late morning: if Morshead went on north-eastwards, he would put the bulk of the 125th German Infantry and the X/7th *Bersaglieri* in a sack. During the following night, Freyberg would take advantage of the Australian success and proceed along the coast. We can clearly see how the plan was adapted in relation to events.

In the early hours of the day, Rommel wrote to his wife:

> "(...) The battle is raging. We might be able to make it, in spite of what we are up against, but things can go wrong and the consequences would be serious to the entire course of war. North Africa would fall into British hands in few days, without any struggle. We shall do our best to avoid it. But the superiority of the enemy is horrifying and our resources are quite scanty (...)"[30].

The letter is discouraged, but not disheartened. Almost all of the armoured forces were reduced to the role of local reserves or sometimes

[29] B. MONTGOMERY, *Memoirs, cit.*, p. 131.

[30] B. LIDDELL HART, *The Rommel Papers, cit.* p. 310.

they even plugged the line. There could have been infiltrations anywhere, especially at night, and nothing could be done about it, except rush everywhere using everything at hand. There were 81 German and 196 Italian efficient medium tanks (67 with the *Littorio* and the *Trieste* and 129 with the *Ariete*). The fuel was very scarce. Regarding ammunition, the level of supplies barred extended firing. It was necessary to fire against well observed targets with short and violent bursts.

As far as it was known of the 8th Army, 58 infantry battalions, 5 battalions of armoured cars or light tanks, and 15 of medium tanks had already been engaged. There were still in reserve: 30 infantry battalions, 2 of armoured cars or light tanks and 7 of medium tanks. Considering that one British armoured battalion had 45 tanks in line and estimating that the enemy had lost about 290, there were about 700 tanks left. They were too many for ACIT. And air reconnaissance reported there was a number of motor vehicles never seen before: 7,750 in the northern sector, 5,000 in the central and 3,500 in the south.

It was more evident than ever that the British were conducting an attrition battle; which was to be obtained with constant attacks and heavy use of aviation and artillery. Once Montgomery was sure that the Italo-German front was breaking up, he would launch the decisive attack.

It was the right moment to make great decisions. In the early afternoon Mancinelli informed *Delease:*

> "(...) A very calm Rommel judges the situation extremely critical due to a progressive strain on the troops faced with the overwhelming power of the enemy and the exhausting absence of provisions, ammunition and fuel for the mobile units. The pressure of the enemy will be halted by all means to the extremes of possibility. But resistance may weaken without supplies and even in such a case there is no way to conceive a retreat. According to his well-known concept, Africa is to be kept or lost on the positions of El Alamein. Therefore, the result of the battle depends first of all on the flow of supplies"[31].

Naturally, at this point it was necessary to hear what the High Command had to say and Rommel asked for Cavallero's presence: "*Considering the difficult situation I would be grateful if Your Excellency would come to my headquarters for a meeting*"[32]. Late in the same night, Barbasetti had to read Cavallero's answer, with a lot of hesitation:

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[31] *Delease* Historical Diary, telegram 5064, 28/10/1942, 14:30 by General Mancinelli.

[32] *Delease* Historical Diary, telegram 5075, 28/10/1942, 12:30 by Colacit.

"I would truly like to come to you as soon as possible. But my personal presence is needed here to make supplies arrive and I am confident they soon will. In the meantime I will send you General Barbasetti who will report immediately"[33].

There is no convincing reason why Cavallero decided not to go to the front. He told von Rintelen that his presence was necessary at the Supreme Command to press for transports: "*You must insist a lot*", he explained, "*to obtain what you want from the Navy!*" But, knowing Rommel, he had to understand that the request was due to a dramatic situation and to the necessity to make decisions of great importance. Nevertheless, after he had affirmed with a bit of rhetoric that "*the situation is to be solved here*", he spoke his mind: "*If we were in Libya, all we could do would be congratulate Marshal Rommel if things went better. And If they went wrong, he wouldn't certainly need our advice*"[34].

In the meantime, Montgomery's intention of only playing the match to the north and Rommel's consequent resolution of bringing the 21st *Panzer* and other units to the northern sector left the southern front in a condition of a static defence on both sides, except for some local and sporadic fights. But it caused lots of changes in the organisation of command.

General von Thoma took responsibility for the entire north front. He had under his control: the DAK (the 15th and 21st *Panzer*), the XXI Corps (the *Trento*, the *Bologna*, the 164th Infantry Division), the *Littorio* and the *Trieste* (la latter was detached during the night near Sidi Abd el Rahman). The 90th Light passed to the army reserve, together with the *Kasta* and the 580th Scout Group. General De Stefanis, on the contrary, was put in charge of the whole southern front, that is to say: the X Corps (the *Brescia*, the *Folgore* and the *Pavia*), the XX Corps (the *Ariete* and the *Nizza* Group) and the *Ramcke* Paratrooper Brigade. That is why the *Ariete* tactical group that was moved to the north on the 26th was given back to its division. The *Nizza* Squadron Group, made up of the *Nizza* Group (from the *Ariete*) coming from Matruh and the VIII *Bersaglieri* Battalion on armoured cars (from the *Trieste*) coming from Siwa, had been sent to the Naqb el Khadim zone, on the edge of the Qattara Depression.

[33] *Delease* Historical Diary, tele 33251/Op. 28/10/1942, 22:40 by the Supreme Command.
[34] Cavallero's Diary, 29/10/1942.

The 29th of October

The bulletin issued by *Delease* in the evening of the 29th reported the news that the previous night, at 23:00, after an hour and a half of artillery preparation, the enemy launched a vigorous attack of infantry and tanks north of Hill 28, with the usual and formidable fire support. The attempt had been contained but the struggle lasted all day. The prisoners captured were from the 9th Australian Infantry Division and the tanks from the 1st Armoured Division.

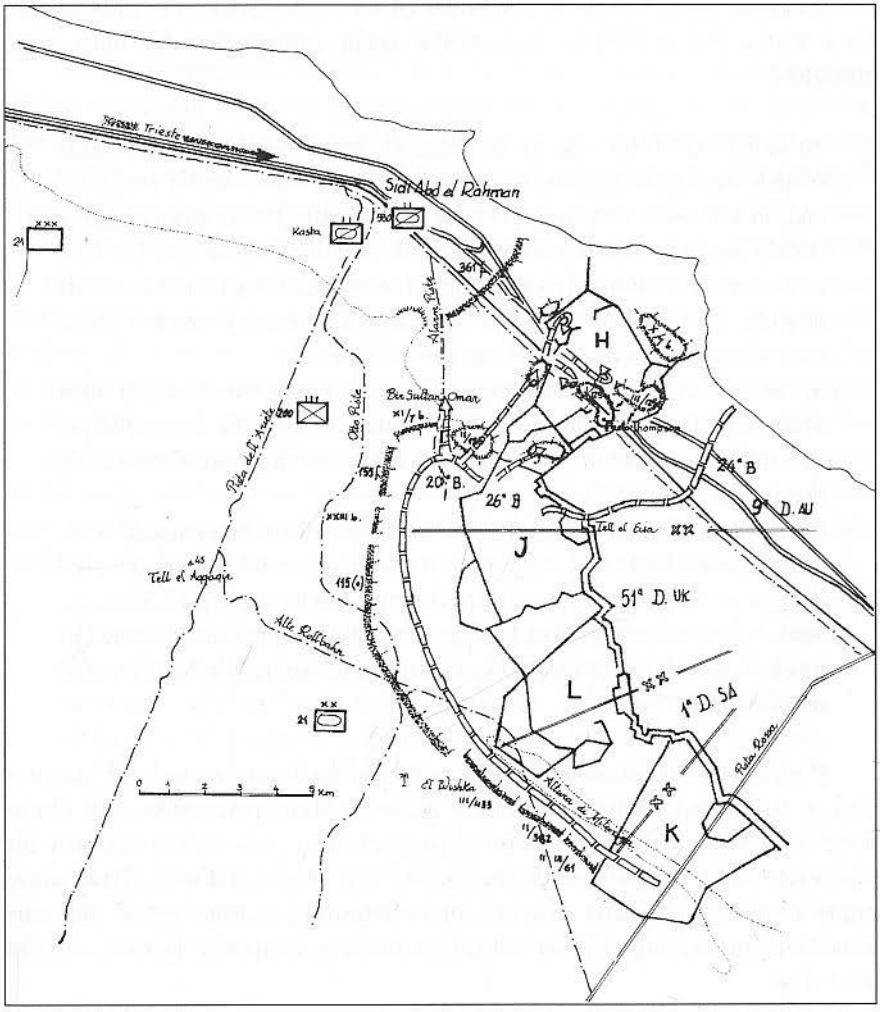
Actually, it was something much more complex, at least for the 30th British Corps. The development of *Lightfoot* had made the Italo-German salient of Tell el Eisa even more marked, to call the place by its common though incorrect name (Sketch N. 49). It was occupied in the north-east by the XI/7th *Bersaglieri*, the II/125th Infantry, the I/125th Infantry, and the III/125th Infantry and by the X/7th *Bersaglieri*, from the area of Hill 28 to the coast. The 361st *Panzergrenadiere* was to the rear, mid-way between Sidi Abd el Rahman and the line, between the railway and the coastal road. The 155th *Panzergrenadiere* was west of Hill 28. The most characteristic topographical element was *Thompson Post,* a rocky ridge ideal for observing and firing over the surrounding desert in all directions. A reinforced platoon of the I/125th Infantry was detached there.

The Australian attack formation consisted of: the 20th Infantry Brigade, with the 40th *Royal Tanks* in the first echelon, and the 26th Infantry Brigade, with the 46th *Royal Tanks* in second echelon. There were at least 224 field howitzers and 48 medium calibre guns supporting the action. Starting from Hill 28, the bulk of the 20th Infantry Brigade had to head north and protect its right side with the 40th *Royal Tanks*. Then it was supposed to stop after a few kilometres, while a battalion would take control of a position south-west of *Thompson Post*.

The possession of these two points would cause the line of the XI/7th *Bersaglieri* and the II/125th Infantry to collapse and would also make it easier for the 26th Infantry Brigade to rush in, heading north.

The first part went well for the Australians, notwithstanding the heavy losses, but the entrance of the 26th Infantry Brigade into the action sank the attack into chaos. The brigade passed through the battalions of the 20th with the 2/23rd Battalion, part of which was loaded on *Bren* carriers and another part on the *Valentines* of the 46th *Royal Tanks*. Nevertheless, the plan to make the infantry arrive simultaneously with the tanks on the objective turned out to be a failure. Because of the limited visibility (due to the dust raised by the vehicles), the unknown minefields (caused by the

Sketch N. 49
"THE ATTACK COUNDUCTED
BY THE 9TH AUSTRALIAN INFANTRY (28-31 OCTOBER)



lack of recognition), and the cross-firing of the defenders, after about five hundred metres the *Bren* carriers and the *Valentine*s started blowing up, the infantrymen were forced to leap to the ground in the firestorm and a dispersion of tanks and infantry rapidly took place. After two or three hundred metres, everything stopped and Morshead decided to renounce the clearly overambitious plan. There were only eight tanks left to the 46th *Royal Tanks* and there were 27 dead and 290 wounded among the

Australians. The two companies of the XI/7th *Bersaglieri* and the II/125th Infantry were practically annihilated. A limited advance by the 90th Light had not significantly changed the limited success of the 9th Australian.

Rommel observed those six hours of ferocious battle. He tried to rest for a while, but at 3:30 he was awake again, absorbed in his harrowing thoughts:

> "It seemed doubtful", he wrote, "that we would be able to resist such violent attacks like the ones the British had been launching for very long and, in addition, were in a position to intensify. It was evident that I should not have waited for the decisive exploitation, but that I had to move immediately to the west. Such a decision, though, could not but provoke the loss of most of the non-motorized infantry, because these units were too strictly involved in the struggle.
> So we had to try to induce the enemy to interrupt the offensive once again, with the tenaciousness of our defence. It was only a vague hope, but the fuel situation prevented us from carrying out a retreating manoeuvre.
> If the retreat became obligatory, the main care of the army would be to bring as many tanks and weapons to the west as possible. It was not possible to let the army be completely destroyed in the area of El Alamein. And so, that morning I decided that, if the British pressure became too much, I would step back to the Fuka sector, before the battle would reach its peak"[35].

Barbasetti, accompanied by General Bernasconi, landed at Fuka airport at 10:40 and went immediately to ACIT Headquarters by car. There were only Mancinelli and Westphal present during the conversation with Rommel. After a few hours Barbasetti departed for Fuka. That same night he sent a telegraph to Cavallero containing a summary of the conversation, promising that he would transmit a detailed report by air the next day:

> "In brief, our friend would like you to know the following: if the enemy action continues for another two or three days with the same intensity, ACIT will not, I repeat, will not be able to resist any further. To avoid such a crisis, we must urgently receive an air shipment of ammunition, which is now being consumed in quantities superior to what we receive,

[35] B. LIDDELL HART, *The Rommel Papers*, *cit.* p. 312.

> and fuel, because today we were forced to keep the cars standing still or limit their manoeuvres, and men, about 5,000 or 6,000 Germans that could replace the troops, who are still fighting well, but are under heavy strain"[36].

The conversation was calm but firm. Rommel valued the seriousness of the matters to the point that he asked for these things to be brought to the attention of Cavallero and Mussolini only and that they remain secret. Barbasetti confirmed and showed the plan of expected arrivals from Italy. This program had just been handed in the day before by Major Pistotti of the Supreme Command. In that regard, Rommel excluded the possibility of relying on provisions before they reached Africa. He was even more worried because of the news that the *Luisiana* tanker, sent from Libya to replace *Proserpina*, sunk on 26 October, had also been sunk. During the meeting he became irritated, though Barbasetti did not write it in his report to the Supreme Command. He thanked General Bernasconi, who had reported the arrival of 30 fighters, and added: "*It is necessary that between one enemy bomb and the next, our soldiers on the front line can see one of our planes from time to time!*"[37]. But the accusations reached Rome through von Rintelen:

> "The powerfully armed cruisers", remarked Rommel, "and other ships whose load had to reach the front immediately, were still sent to Bengasi in order to avoid the British torpedo bombers (...). Suddenly it was decided to use a huge number of submarines, war ships, transport airplanes and auxiliary vessels. If it had happened after the conquest of Tobruk, we would not have been in El Alamein at the end of October yet"[38].

Cavallero noted: "*I inform Fougier that it seems that 'Proserpina' did not have air protection. Rommel told me this with legitimate indignation*"[39], and he got in contact with Kesselring. He then had to tell him,

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[36] *Delease* Historical Diary, telegram s.n. 29/10/1942. Regarding the requirement of personnel, it is worth quoting a letter from *Delease* to the Army General Staff about the situation of radio-telegraphers in the main formations which was so poor that "*it would even be impossible to assure the employment of the radio-telegraph stations available at the dependent formations of infantry and artillery*". The request regarded about 400 radio-telegraphists for the infantry, and 350 for the artillery, obviously "ready to work" (*Delease*, f. 3641/Ord., 31/10/1942).

[37] Report by Major Pistotti, 31/10/1942.

[38] E. ROMMEL, *op. cit.*, pp. 272-273.

[39] Cavallero's Diary, 29/10/1942.

among other things, that Mussolini counted a lot on his help to win the battle: he considered him the maker of victory.

To summarize, Rommel informed Barbasetti as follows:

> "It is not possible to interrupt the battle to get away from the enemy: besides the deficiency of troops that could retreat, (as for means of transport) there is no fuel for the manoeuvre. The only solution is to go on with struggle to the extreme on the El Alamein front"[40].

Nevertheless, he nurtured some vague mental reservations or perhaps he changed his mind. Nobody wants to insinuate that he was behaving reticently, willingly or not. It is absolutely natural for a leader to keep every possible escape route in his mind, in the presence of a problem that only seems to indicate an obligated and unpleasant solution. Rommel knew very well, as a military expert, that, in *those conditions*, staying in that place was not a choice but a resignation to a more or less glorious end. The problem was that it would mean the end, not only for ACIT, but for all of Northern Africa, with all its consequences.

That is why we do not want to accuse him of ambiguity when, after a quick breakfast, he started to verify the existence of a rear line to be used in defence for some time with Westphal. Being in the desert, such a line necessarily had to be a narrow stretch between the sea and the Qattara Depression. There was the Fuka meridian line (a gap of about 75 km) west of the El Daba meridian, rejected immediately as it was too close to the battlefield; this had the advantage of being behind the base of Matruh. It could work. After all, remaining in El Alamein, one was forced to take a costly course without convincing results: a series of strenuous sectoral counterattacks of local importance to ACIT. If, instead, a pause was taken or provoked in the British offensive, saving a good part of the army would perhaps be feasible.

The discussion with Westphal was interrupted by a dispatch coming from Rome. The Supreme Command, citing a reliable source, asked for information about the long range movement of two armoured British divisions coming from the northern margin of the Qattara Depression, and sighted about 100 km south of Matruh[41]. Let's say immediately that nobody was surprised, because three days before the Supreme Command had transmitted the same intelligence report and had even indicated the

[40] *Delease* Historical Diary, phono. SD/196/Secr., 29/10/1942.
[41] DSCS, tele 33254/Op. 29/10/1942, at 11:56.

probable number of armoured vehicles[42], though the ACIT intelligence office judged it unreliable given the nature of the depression terrain, even on its margins. Rommel believed it anyway and, quite alarmed, took precautions to defend Matruh. *"We aren't being spared of anything"*, he commented[43]. He did not calm down until the following day, after many air and land reconnaissance missions.

In the evening he decided to recover the 21st *Panzer*, employed in the Kidney area, replacing it with the *Trieste*.

Let's look at what was happening on the opposite side of the hill. *Ultra* decodings had already informed the 8th Army Headquarters about the sinking of the *Proserpina*, the *Tergestea* and the *Luisiana*. During the night, *Enigma* messages had been decoded saying that Rommel had asked Kesselring for provisions on the previous day at 13:00 since *"the situation was extremely critical"* and the OBS, *"considering the fuel situation for the armoured army seriously tense"*, ordered the air transport of petrol *"day and night up to the last crew and last airplane"*. On 29 October, in the morning, Rommel made a decision to send all the available vehicles to collect fuel in Bengasi, and he also issued an order of the day inciting the extreme effort for a battle *"for life or death"*[44].

This whole situation was considered with attention during the meeting of the 8th Army commanders within the framework of Operation *Lightfoot*. The meeting was also attended by Alexander and Casey, the Secretary of State, pushed by the veiled criticisms that had started circulating in London. Montgomery put on a confident presentation - he had good reason to - and refused any possible doubts, reminding them that he had predicted heavy fighting for about ten days. Truthfully, there were many uncertainties since the failure of the Australian action did not allow for a way out of that stalemate threat. To have Morshead continue would mean going against an even

[42] DSCS, tele 33210/Op. 26/10/1942, at 12:00: *"A reliable source gives the following information about the enemy plan of attack. A frontal attack along the coast direction, winding at the southern margin of Qattara Depression. At the same time, disembarking at Ras Abu Laho and Zauiet Harun and Marsa Matruk. Frontal attack with two combined armoured brigades on 1,100 tanks, four infantry divisions, 3,000 aircraft. Encircling action with 550 medium and light tanks and infantry"*.

[43] H.O. BEHRENDT, *op. cit.*, p. 252. The worry about the possibility of things coming from the depression persisted. Until 2 November, ACIT ordered the XX Corps Headquarters to intensify surveillance of the northern sector. *"It is particularly important to observe and survey the Qattara Depression from the south point of Mingar Ralat up to Naqb Abu Dweis"*. This was prescribed by an order isued at 21:48 on 1 November.

[44] F.H. HINSLEY, *op. cit.*, p. 441.

tougher resistance. General McCreery, who accompanied Alexander, intervened in the discussion and keenly proposed the necessity of moving the direction of attack further south. Such a point of view even pleased de Guingand, not to mention the Commander in Chief in the Middle East, but Montgomery did not want to hear about it. He was against an operation where both flanks would be uncovered, while, towards the coast, he would be able to count on the valid contribution of the British ships. He made only one concession: he would postpone the operation by twenty-four hours, that is to say to the night of 31st, to allow the troops to have a rest.

Moreover, once the guests had left, it was learned, from interceptions and interrogation of prisoners, that the three regiments of the 90th Light had in some way been involved in the struggle against the 9th Australian, and that the *Trieste* had moved south of Sidi Abd el Rahman to replace the 21st *Panzer*. These intelligence reports meant that Rommel expected new efforts in the coastal sector and that he did not have any fresh reinforcements: all of his units were now in line.

This would evidently change the situation. The Australians would resume the action to the north, but it was no longer oriented to develop toward Sidim Abd El Rahman and beyond. At that point, it was necessary to make Rommel believe in the British intention of opening a road in the direction of the coast. When all the Italo-German units were engaged in the area, the manoeuvre mass would make a decisive blow from the 51st *Highlanders* sector.

To summarize, the new concept of operation was based on the main effort gravitating south of Hill 28. Among other things, it would hit the Italians (possibly, of the *Trieste*) for the most part. Morshead would resume the strong diversionary attack on the night of the 31st. The following night Leese would make Freyberg join in the action, but not with the Australians as it had been thought before, but rather westwards, over a front of about four kilometres between Hill 28 and Kidney, up to the track to Sidi Abd el Rahman. Lumsden, covered by a solid screen provided by the New Zealanders, would draw up for battle in the Tell el Aqqaqir zone. Once the armoured units of ACIT were defeated, he would then move toward the Tell el Ghazal station, about 13 km west of Sidi Abd el Rahman, and trap all the units stationed in the coastal sector. *"I made this decision at 11:00 on the 29th of October"*, Montgomery specified[45].

[45] B. MONTGOMERY, *Memoirs, cit.* p. 132. It is curious how an event may be described according to different versions. What is reported in the text takes into account a clarification made by de Guingand

In the early morning in London, General Brooke had to face an irritated Churchill. He wanted to know what "*his*" Monty was up to. In the last days, he had not gained much and it almost seemed he wanted to retreat the troops from the line. Why had he assured him that everything would end within a week's time if he did not intend to commit himself completely? Was it possible that there was not a single general in Great Britain capable of winning at least one battle? Brooke, hardly containing himself, answered that there was no reason to jump to certain conclusions, but Churchill, already off, wanted a meeting with the Chiefs of General Staff and other members of the War Cabinet at 12:30.

During the meeting Brooke defended Montgomery once again and was lucky enough to find a powerful ally in Smuts, who managed to calm Churchill down. But *"personally"*, admitted Brooke, *"I had my doubts and worries about the course of events, though I had to keep them to myself (...). Fortunately, I did not receive the letter that day in which Monty confided his state of mind at that stage of the battle to me"*[46].

In the afternoon Churchill sent a letter of congratulations and implicit incitement to Alexander. The dispatch presented great prospects for *Torch* and, therefore, for the whole campaign:

> 1. The Defence Committee of the War Cabinet congratulates you on the brilliant and determined way in which you and General Montgomery launched the decisive battle which is now under way. The Committee thinks that the general situation justifies all the risks and sacrifices connected with the unrelenting pursuit of the battle. We assure you that all the decisions made by you with the aim of annihilating Rommel's army and fighting this battle to the death, will be fully approved by us.
> 2. (...)
> 3. (...)

published in an article of *The Sunday Times* of 21/10/1962. Alexander expressed himself in a different way: *"However, (...) in the morning of the 29th we received some news which led us to completely modify the direction of our attack (...). Rommel moved the 90th Light to the sector of Sidi Abd el Rahman and left the Trieste with the task of opposing the initial bridgehead where we were now on the defensive. This decreased the possibility of achieving a decisive breach along the axis of the coastal road, but I thought we would be able to turn the situation in our favour anyway, etc."* (*D'El Alamein à Tunis, cit.*, p. 57). Moreover, Alexander himself gave all the credit for the decision to McCreery: *"The commander of the 8th Army seemed to be in favour of an attack conducted as further north as possible. But Dick McCreery, as an expert tank commander, felt it was necessary to push just north of the existing northern corridor. I have no doubts that it was the key decision in the battle of El Alamein, nor do I doubt that Monty was fundamentally grateful to my Chief of Staff"* (*Memoirs, cit.*, p. 41).

[46] A. BRYANT, *op. cit.*, pp. 469-470.

4. *What follows is reserved for you and Montgomery only*. Clark visited North Africa and spoke with French generals who support us. We thus have reason to believe that we will not only meet with little resistance, but that we will receive a lot of help. As far as we know, the enemy still does not have the slightest idea of what awaits them. They do not even realize the imminence and the power of the attack (...). If your battle continues without breaks, it will contribute significantly to our victory"[47].

The 30th of October

Seeing that the enemy was still absorbed in rearranging its formations, Rommel, a bit relieved by the arrival of a ship with 600 tons of fuel, decided to personally examine the Fuka position. He was ever more convinced that ACIT was not able to bear the weight of new enemy attempts at breakthrough. The infantry was the key: "*In the open desert, the Italian infantry formations would be dead weight, as they did not have any means of transportation at their disposal*". To remove them from the front without letting the enemy notice the door left temporarily open in the centre and the south, it would be necessary to engage the British Infantry in the crumbling manoeuvre of the frontline, so it would not be able to immediately take advantage of the leak. At that point, it would be necessary to quickly disengage the Italian infantry in the cover of the night, load the vehicles with as many troops as possible and drive them away immediately and, finally, lead the armoured and motorised divisions into a delaying action to save what can be saved. The plan was probably feasible. These were Rommel's thoughts, which he communicated to Mancinelli with the same conviction that he showed when he had expressed the inevitability of resisting in place the day before.

In that same morning, by initiation of the Field Marshal, Mancinelli informed *Delease* and the Supreme Command:

"Rommel", he wrote, "thought about yesterday's meeting for a long time, which not only made him calm but acted as a tonic. Having reconsidered the problem of the possibility for an eventual retreat, he has solved it under the condition that he have, even for a short time, 1,500 motor vehicles and enough fuel to retreat for about 100 kilometres with the German and Italian infantry troops and their weapons and ammunition from the *Bologna* division on (that is to say for the centre-south part of the formation). The northern part would make it by its own means.

[47] W. CHURCHILL, *op. cit.*, pp. 214-215.

> The halt line would be on about 28th meridian [at Fuka], short, which cannot be surrounded from the south, near the Marsa Matruh logistic base. Rommel thus asks you to take his project into consideration and put the above at his disposal, keeping in mind that it would be a temporary diversion of vehicles, on which the salvation of the units may depend. It would probably be advantageous to have a separate meeting in the near future at the ACIT Headquarters in order to finalize the details.
> It is understood that the hypothesis of retreat is an extreme case and would become operational only in case the enemy breaks through the front. Meanwhile the decision remains to rest firm on the present positions"[48].

The day was relatively calm from the operational point of view and the *Royal Air Force* activity, limited by bad meteorological conditions, was quite reduced in comparison with the previous days. The break was used by ACIT to complete some of the movements and transfers they had agreed upon. Considering that the recovery of the 21st *Panzer* had to be completed by the night of 31st, von Thoma distributed the tasks for the front among the 164th Infantry Division, the 15th *Panzer* and the *Bologna*. The first had to move from the sea to Kidney included; the second had to reach the area covering the Miteiriya ridge and the third had to stay where it was, that is to say, in the area up to El Mreir included. The new arrangement had to be in force from 16:00 on, but the 21st *Panzer* would keep the area until the 104th *Panzergrenadiere* was completely replaced by *Trieste* units.

The 90th Light continued to be deployed towards the coast with reserve functions for the protection of Sidi Abd el Rahman. As for the Italian units, the order of the DAK specified, with delicate euphemism, that they had to *co-operate* in the following way: the remainder of the *Trento* and most of the *Trieste* (34 efficient tanks) together with the 164th Infantry Division; the 65th Infantry and the *Littorio* (30 efficient vehicles) with the 15th *Panzer*[49].

Montgomery spent his day working on the directives for the final effort, while the 10th and 30th Corps worked feverishly on the reorganization for the

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[48] DSCS, tele 5096, 30/10/1942, 11:15 by Gen. Mancinelli, decoded by the Supreme Command at 18:00 on 31 October (the telegram was then repeated). It should be noted that, strangely, the dispatch is *not* reported in the *Delease* historical diary; moreover Barbasetti's annotation in Mancinelli's tele 5172 of 2/11/1942, at 20:50, indicated that it had arrived.

[49] From the 24th to the 29th the *Littorio* had lost altogether: 32 officers and 278 non-commissioned officers and enlisted. 80 tanks had been hit, half of which could be repaired; 8 self-propelled - all repairable; 11 88 pieces, of which 3 repairable. *Delease* Historical Diary, tele 5127, 31/10/1942, 11:10 by Gen. Mancinelli.

decisive action. The 7th Armoured Division was called north; it had to pour in during the night of 1 November, leaving the 4th Light Armoured Brigade in place. In the evening Freyberg, who had been gathering the brigades he had received as a reinforcement (the 151st of the 50th Infantry Division and the 152nd of the 51st Infantry Division), noticed their fatigue with apprehension and asked Leese to postpone the beginning of the operation by another 24 hours. To attack in the night of 1 November meant needlessly facing the disadvantages of a hasty preparation. The request reached Montgomery at about 20:00, who accepted it, but without enthusiasm.

At about the same time, the 26th Australian Infantry Brigade resumed the attempt north of Hill 28. It had four infantry battalions, one pioneer battalion and the 40th *Royal Tanks* at its disposal. The operational plan was very similar to the one established for the action two days before. It was the 2/32nd Battalion (given to the 24th Infantry Brigade as a reinforcement) to start the attack. At 21:00 it left the departure base and proceeded toward a massive artillery rolling barrage, walking alongside the rear side of the H pocket. It met with the remainder of the II/125th Infantry and overturned part of it after a difficult struggle. Then it reached and surpassed the railway and, finally, got to the coastal road at about midnight. The Axis troops, from *Thompson Post* to the sea, were trapped. But from this moment on, the wheel of fortune turned on the side of ACIT.

The 31st of October

The 2/32nd Battalion had to be overtaken by the 2/3rd Pioneer Battalion, charged with continuing up to the coast. The pioneers met with resistance from some back elements of the III/125th Infantry, suffered many losses and only managed to reach a position astride the coastal road. The setback caused the delay of the two battalions in the second echelon that, in addition, lost connection with each other. Consequently, each battalion advanced on its own south-eastwards, facing harsh opposition by the I and the II /125th German Infantry. At about 3:00 in the morning, the two battalions, which were left with less than 100 men each, returned to assemble near the 2/32nd Pioneers, which was then ordered to depart toward the sea. It moved against the positions of the X/7th *Bersaglieri* and, after an initial rush, abandoned the match.

At sunrise, the remainder of the 26th Brigade was grouped in a small area between the railway and the coastal road, hit by the firing of the 361st *Panzergrenadiere* in the north-west. But most of the 125th Infantry and the X/7th *Bersaglieri* were cut out. When the 40th *Royal Tanks* moved to reach

the 26th Brigade, it ran into the Italian CCCLVII 75 Group, whose soldiers fought bravely falling on the battlefield or opening a breach with weapons in hand. Then it found itself in the middle of the first German counterattack led by the 3rd Scout Group, and so it halted.

Rommel had already made a mistake by preserving the dangerous and useless salient of the 125th Infantry. He could have recovered the troops and made a new line of resistance, a shorter one, more or less at the height of the 90th Light, taking advantage of the operational stasis. Or perhaps, he could have ordered the 125th Infantry and the X/7th *Bersaglieri* to go northwest, as soon as the attack of the 26th Australian Brigade had started.

He did not do it and, in the morning of 31st, he made a second mistake: he overestimated the extent of the Australian attack. Von Sponeck insistently asked permission to attack with the 90th Light, sure to quickly obtain some positive results, but Rommel did not agree. He moved the ACIT Headquarters about 8 kilometres west of El Daba - which was noticed by the troops - and the tactical one near the Sidi Abd el Rahman mosque. He then called von Thoma and Bayerlein. The latter had come back from leave in the morning of the 29th to reassume his position as the Chief of Staff of the DAK, so he could order a massive counterattack with the tank formations. The morning bulletin distributed by ACIT said:

> "The enemy is continuously bringing reinforcements from south-east to the breach point. The army intends to counterattack at about midday, using the 21st Armoured Division, which was withdrawn from the front last night, from the Sidi Abd el Rahman zone to south-east to defeat the enemy by infiltration and to liberate the 125th Armoured Grenadiers Regiment. The division already took part in the battle once with all its available means. The situation must be considered serious, although there is no sign of a further attack by enemy forces"[50].

However, later on, Mancinelli, reporting on the state of things, specified: "*As serious as it may be, the situation is being considered with calm*"[51].

The response manoeuvred by the 21st *Panzer* lasted for a few hours. At 16:00, the liaison with the surrounded battalions had been re-established, but the Australians remained near the railway. Von Thoma and Bayerlein were convinced there would be an opportunity to retreat the

[50] *Delease* Historical Diary, tele 5127, 31/10/1942, 11:10 by Gen. Mancinelli.
[51] *Ibid.*, tele 5128, 31/10/1942, 11:30 by Gen. Mancinelli.

125th from the trap, but Rommel persisted in his refusal and ordered the 21st *Panzer* to keep on clearing the salient the next day.

We must now make a digression. The communication made by Mancinelli to the Supreme Command and *Delease* in the morning of the 30th, dealing with Rommel's new orientation toward the eventuality of retreat, has already been mentioned. According to what Mancinelli said, Barbasetti immediately went back to Rommel informing him of the clear opposition of the Supreme Command to any hypothesis of retreat. Mancinelli did not specify the date of the meeting - and strangely nothing was written in the *Delease* historical diary - but, from the way he expressed himself, it seems that the conversation took place on the 31st. On the basis of his detailed description, the course of the meeting can be summarised. Rommel wanted to explain and justify his ideas but Barbasetti objected there were not enough vehicles, not even for a short time. They had all been used to bring the supplies forward, and even a short interruption of that activity would risk the paralysis of ACIT. In the end, he repeated the exact opinion held by Rommel on the 29th: nothing to do, but resist in place.

> "Rommel", Mancinelli described, "was very upset by this clear refusal. He was assailed with worries about events forcing him to face a retreat. He was very sensitive to the accusation that had been made a year before, saying that he had sacrificed the Italian divisions in order to save the German ones and he did not want to find himself in such a situation once again. We knew the situation and it merited the darkest predictions. So, it was his precise duty to consider the possibility of saving the army, naturally without sacrificing the Italians. Then there were also German troops, about two divisions, without transportation.
> Leaving the caravan where Rommel had his office and where the conversation had taken place, General Barbasetti said to me in a sarcastic way: "if we give him the transport vehicles, he is going to retreat without any doubt!"[52].

In Mancinelli's opinion, both the Supreme Command and *Delease* planned to nail Rommel down to El Alamein line by denying the trucks, without taking into account the vast possibilities offered by the thousands of square kilometres ideal for a retreat manoeuvre. Nevertheless, such an interpretation seems a bit forced: the problem of transport was real and well known. Anyway, Mancinelli, who completely shared Rommel's point

[52] G. MANCINELLI, *op. cit.*, pp. 197-198.

of view, tried a compromise. He asked that the means of transport gathered for the need be assigned to him. He would take care of their distribution, if and when it was deemed necessary. Barbasetti was not convinced at all and *"he probably thought that I had been infected by Rommel's defeatism"*. He only replied that, *"eventually"*, measures could be taken in that sense, if the necessity presented itself in an urgent and concrete way[53].

3. Operation *Supercharge*

Montgomery called the attack *"Supercharge"* that, according to the expression used in his letter to Brooke, would hurl Rommel off his perch. In the end, it was really just a newly revised and corrected edition of *Lightfoot*: breakthrough by the infantry, with an initial penetration 4 km deep that would then be brought to 6 km in the morning of the 31st in order to upset the ACIT's lines of defence over a larger area. It would be followed by an irruption of the armoured forces and the destruction of the enemy's armoured reserves; in the end, it would be followed by the complete disintegration of the enemy rear zone and the entire ACIT[54].

Of course there were many elements to take into account. Having profited from recent experiences, it was necessary for the armoured vehicles to enter the field after the wide breach (nearly four km) opened by the infantry had been cleared of mines and made secure for heavy vehicles. Not only that but, as the location of the anti-tank weapons and the static structures of the Italo-German defences were not well known, the advance of the armoured brigades would also have to be preceded by a rolling artillery barrage. As the aim was to provoke a tank battle, it would be useful for the infantry to get at least as far as seven-eight hundred metres from the Sidi Abd el Rahman Track (Sketch N. 50).

But what infantry should be used? It was not simply a matter of identifying the most efficient units, but also a commander and a general staff. Montgomery chose Freyberg, but could not neglect the statement he had made: *"I will take command of any other infantry unit, but I will not lead my New Zealanders to attack one more time!"* An agreement was found

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[53] *Ibid*. The incident was narrated and underlined by the author himself also in AA.VV., *"Storia della seconda guerra mondiale"*, cit. Mancinelli had commented harshly here: *"I had to talk at length about this detail, because it was not the reason for the defeat which was already evident and marked, but for the extent of losses during the battle, especially for the Italian units"* (vol. III, p.330-331).

[54] Operation order dated 30/10/1942.

with a strange compromise. The unit charged with the breakthrough would consist of the command of the 2nd New Zealand, the 151st *Durham* Infantry Brigade of the 50th Infantry Division, the 152nd *Seaforth* and *Cameron* Infantry Brigade of the 51st Infantry Division, the 9th and 23rd Armoured Brigades, and, for a specific task, the 133rd *Sussex* Infantry Brigade of the 10th Armoured Division and the *Maori* Battalion. For the artillery, General Weir, commander of the New Zealand artillery, had all the New Zealand and Scottish regiments under his control, one Australian, those of the 1st and 10th Armoured Divisions and two medium calibre ones. A total of 192 guns that would allow for the most formidable rolling barrage, which had never been seen since the First World War. Moreover, 168 more pieces would be dedicated to the strongholds and Italo-German batteries. The progression was characterized by an intermediate objective established at about two km from the departure line. Speaking of which, it had been decided to clear out the advanced position just before the attack, so that the 151st and 152nd Brigades could not make topographical mistakes from the beginning.

A particular task was mentioned in regards to the 133rd Infantry Brigade and the *Maoris*. In short, they were charged with the elimination of two preliminary obstacles: the *Sussex* had to occupy *Woodcock* and the *Maoris* a stronghold southwest of Hill 28.

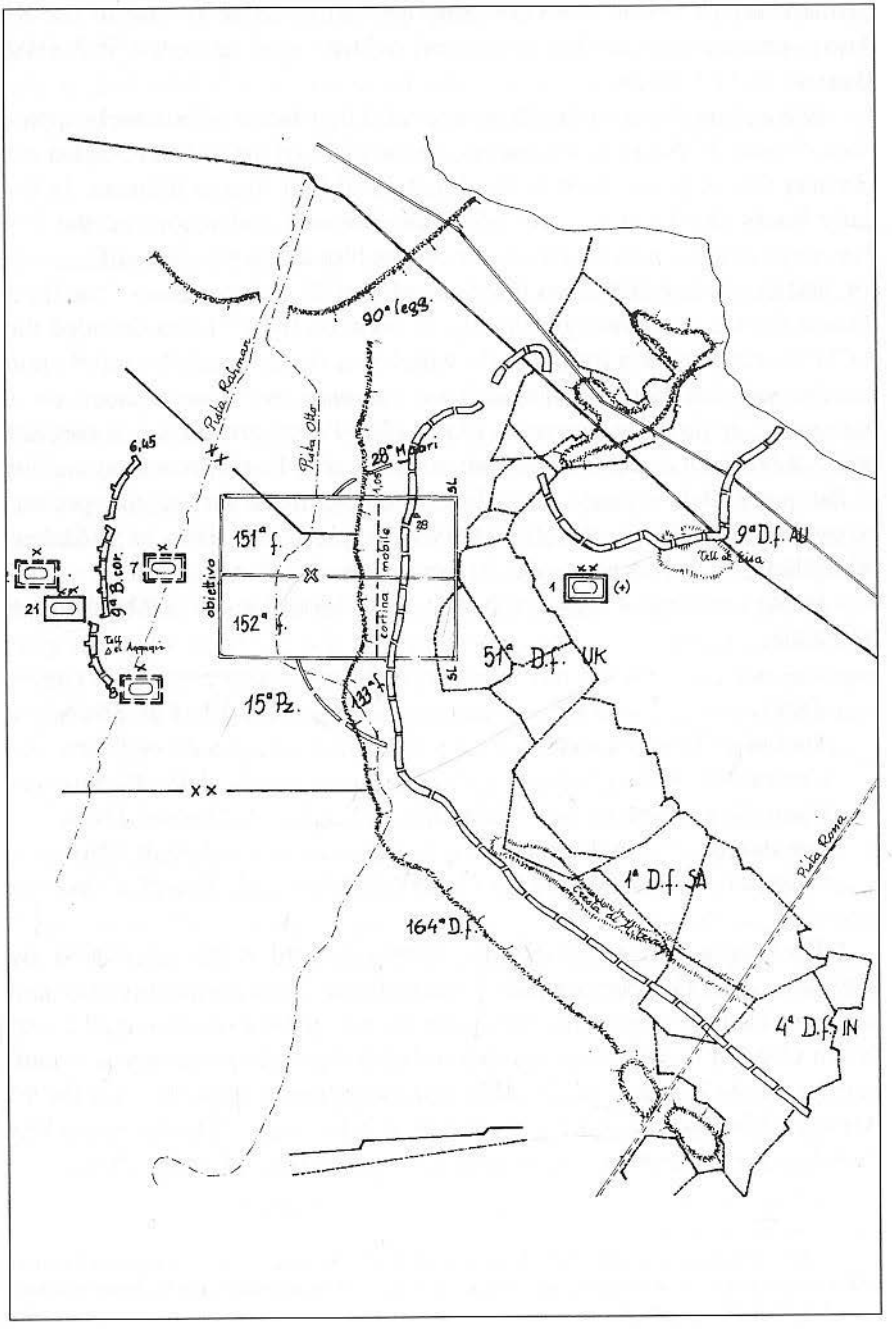
As soon as the road was open, the 151st and 152nd Brigades, reinforced with the 8th and 50th *Royal Tanks* respectively, each with some forty *Valentines*, would proceed as far as their targets, *Brandy* and *Neat*.

Then the 9th Armoured Brigade would overtake the infantry troops and break through the German anti-tank barrier along the Rahman Track. After this last obstacle was overcome, Freyberg would hand over to Lumsden, who would initially only employ the 1st Armoured Division (the 2nd and 8th Armoured Brigades and the 7th Motor Brigade) to come out into the open field.

It is useful to compare the two opposing sides. The British had gathered a mass of 487 medium tanks subdivided as follows:

Unit	*Grants*	*Shermans*	*Crusaders*
1st Arm. Div.	–	–	6
2nd Arm. Bde.	–	90	66
8th Arm. Bde.	39	23	47
8th Arm. Div.	–	–	4
22nd Arm. Bde.	54	–	26
9th Arm. Bde.	40	39	53

Sketch N. 50
"THE PLAN FOR THE *'SUPERCHARGE'* MANOEUVRE"



Considering the additional 80 *Valentines* of the 8th and 50th *Royal Tanks,* all together Montgomery threw about 570 tanks into the fray in the northern sector[55]. Rommel could oppose 240 tanks according to the 8th Army intelligence service estimates, which were actually 167 (102 *Panzers* and 65 M13s).

It is assumed that the last news provided by *Ultra* was extremely appreciated by the 8th Army Headquarters. In the night of the 29th, it revealed the German fear of penetration in the direction of Sidi Abd el Rahman. In the early hours of 31st, it also revealed that Rommel had recovered the 21st *Panzer* to employ it in favour of the troops blocked in the Tell el Eisa sector, and the *Trieste* had taken the place of the 21st in the sector of the front chosen for the breakthrough. Finally, at noon on the 1st *Ultra* decoded the ACIT evening bulletin from the 31st which was further cause for relief upon discovering that Rommel intended to *"continue the counterattack on 1 November for the total liberation of the 125th Panzergrenadiere Regiment"* and that he had not seen any indications of another British attack on the rest of the line. *Dulcis in fundo*, according to the picture of the situation provided by the *Fliegerführer,* the efficient German planes consisted in 36 *Stukas*, 50 fighters, 8 light bombers and 10 reconnaissance planes.

In the morning of 1 November, at 8:00, Montgomery established the timetable:

Zero hour.....0:55 of 2 Nov.
Start of artillery preparation .....1:05 of 2 Nov.
Conquest of infantry targets .....3:45 of 2 Nov
Overtaking of infantry by 9th Arm. Bde.....5:45 of 2 Nov.
Advance by 1st Arm. Div. .....5:30 of 2 Nov
Overtaking of 9th Arm. Brig. by 1st Armoured Div.....6:45 of 2 Nov.

The battle was to be led by Freyberg until 6:45, afterwards by Lumsden. Also Freyberg called his subordinate commanders together and was very clear in stating that the operation was to be a success at all costs. When General Currie observed that to break through the enemy anti-tank barrage on the Rahman Track cold mean casualties of up to 50% for the 9th Armoured Brigade, Freyberg replied in a calm tone: *"Maybe more. The Commander of the Army is prepared to accept losses of 100%"*[56].

[55] The 8th Army had another 250 efficient tanks of all sorts (including 97 *Stuarts*) in the units which were not directly involved in *Supercharge*, as well as about 200 other vehicles being repaired.

[56] L. PHILLIPS, *op. cit.*, p. 270.

Late in the morning General Krause, commander of the ACIT artillery, came back from an accurate reconnaissance of the Fuka line, with a very favourable report regarding its utilization: the southern sector was protected by a steep ridge that did not allow tank movement and this was sure to gain time. It is not known if, after such information, ACIT General Staff had immediately started to work on outlining a plan for the retreat of the army, but it is very likely, given Rommel's implicit admission:

> "Presumably, mention of what we were doing had reached Hitler's Headquarters through some channels. In any case, it was known - as I discovered later - that we had prepared a phase plan for this operation in advance"[57].

Although the British pressure appeared to have lost its luster and the attempts of the 30th Corps continued to be unsuccessful, the situation remained very serious. Rommel was very tense. As he wrote to his wife that evening, only a week had passed since his return to Egypt, a week of very hard fighting during which more than once he had feared not being able to go on. In the extreme north of the front, where the situation was going from bad to worse, he was only able to take a sigh of relief in the early afternoon thanks to von Thoma's victorious counterattack, which had pushed the Australians south of the railway. But the physical and nervous strain became more and more unbearable. As for the supplies, something was arriving, *"but it is a tragedy"*, he wrote", *that this aid only arrives when the situation is nearly hopeless"*[58].

At the higher levels the situation was seen as serious, but perhaps not in its real dimensions. The slight improvement of the transport crisis, it seemed, was misunderstood for a considerable improvement of the general level of supplies. Kesselring, for instance, had made a lightning-fast trip to Africa - even if it had little practical meaning, as Rommel said nothing about it, and when he came back to Rome, he brought comforting news for Cavallero:

> "Kesselring states", Cavallero noted, "that if supplies continue to be delivered at the present rate everything is fine. It seems that the British military authorities wanted to postpone the offensive, but the politicians forced the issue in order to have it coincide with the anniversary of 28

[57] B. LIDDELL HART, *The Rommel Papers, cit.*, p. 316.
[58] *Ibid.*

October [!]. Rommel has succeeded in keeping an armoured division as reserve and it will be employed at once. I thank Kesselring for the great technical and moral aid he has brought to Africa"[59].

And the halt of the Australians on the 31st was so overrated that Cavallero sent Rommel an untimely telegram:

"The Duce has given me the task of expressing his heartfelt appreciation to you for the successful counterattack that you personally led. The Duce wishes moreover to confirm his complete trust that under your leadership the battle underway will be brought to a victorious conclusion".

In the evening, the DAK had reshuffled its formation (Sketch N. 51). The 21st *Panzer* was assembled west of Tell el Aqqaqir, less some detachments.

In short, in the beginning, *Supercharge* would directly attack four battalions (part of the I/200th Infantry, the XXIII/12th *Bersaglieri*, the I/115th Infantry and the I/65th Infantry) and indirectly the rest of the I/200th by means of the 28th *Maori* Battalion, and the II/65th Infantry by the 133rd Infantry Brigade. It is useless to try to calculate the ratio between the local forces.

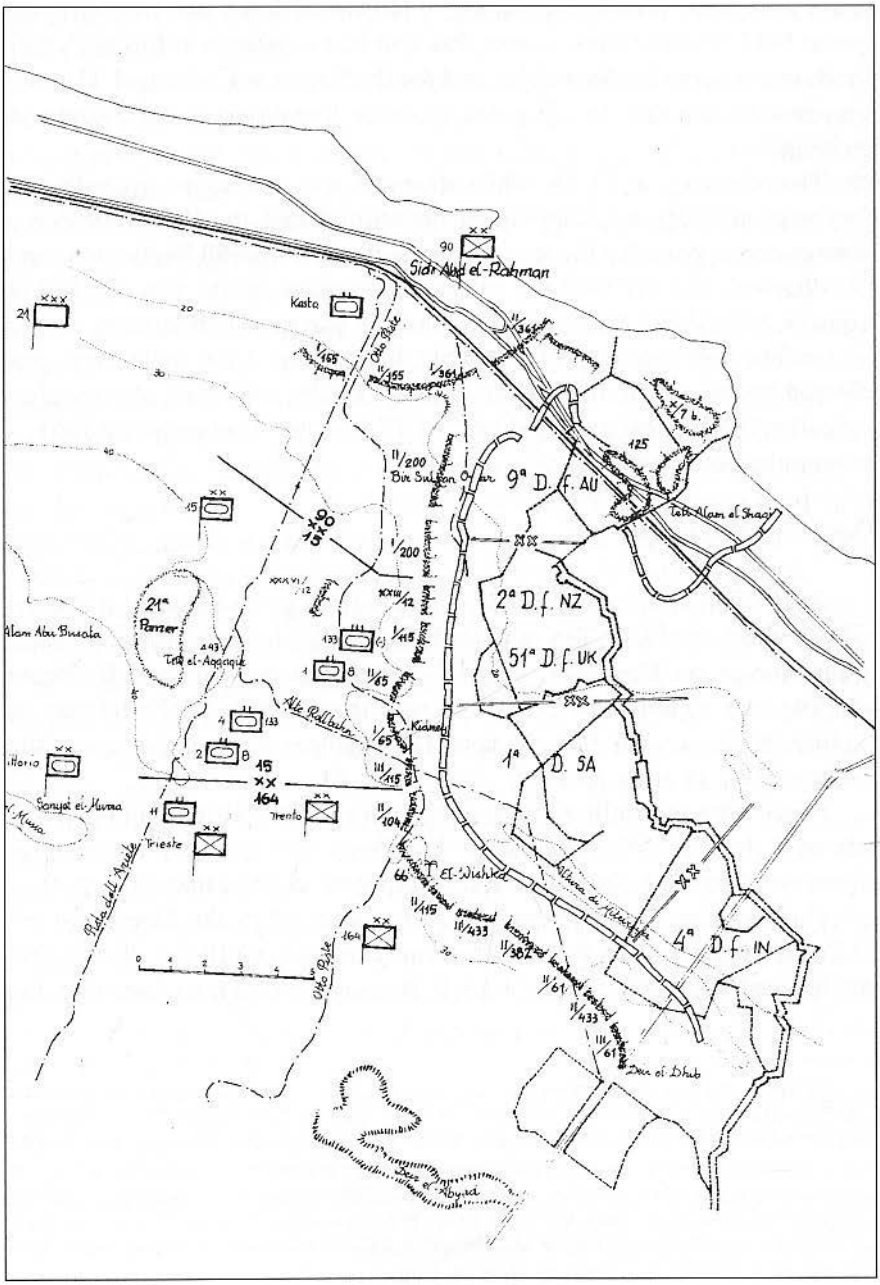
Barbasetti was trying to do something on his side. He did not feel at ease. Even if unconvinced, he was gathering 150 trucks with 50 trailers, enough for 3,000 men with full unit weaponry, in the unpleasant case of a retreat (but Rommel had asked for 1,500!).

He had also sent about 20 medium tanks and 6 self-propelled to the 20th Corps. He alerted the *Pistoia* Infantry Division that was trying to set up a thin line of defence on the Sollum-Halfaya positions with what they had at hand: a battalion and a company of riflemen, a couple of artillery groups and as many tank and armoured car platoons. Two other battalions were engaged at the Cirenaica garrisons. Aside from the extent of these troops, Barbasetti was set on avoiding any possibility of erroneous interpretation of the tactical meaning of the position: "*I would like to take advantage of this opportunity*", he telegraphed the Supreme Command,

[59] Cavallero's diary, 1/11/1942.

[60] The 61st Infantry had the II Battalion, deriving from the merging of the I and the II, and III Battalion, completed with 200 new arrivals. The I had to belong to the *Lupi di Toscana* Infantry Division, expected in Matruh on 2 November. The 62nd Infantry had two battalions: the I coming from the *Piceno* Infantry Division, which had just arrived, and the II made up of the merging of the three original battalions.

Sketch N. 51
"THE SITUATION IN THE NORTHERN SECTOR
IN THE EVENING OF 1 NOVEMBER"



"*to express the opinion that the indicated line has lost a great part of its value today, taking into account that the amount of desert transport vehicles that the British have on hand would allow for wide surrounding; so it would only have a delaying value*"[61]. He would have liked to have the *Spezia* but Cavallero stressed that this unit had to remain at Bastico's disposal, as a reserve for *Superlibia* and for the Supreme Command. He then promised to expedite the dispatch of more battalions of the *Pistoia* in exchange.

That evening, at 21:15, while Rommel was writing to his wife and Freyberg's units were occupying the departure bases, the *Desert Air Force* came over and pounded the area for seven hours. It had 68 *Wellingtons* and 19 *Albacores* that bombed the selected objectives in the areas of Tell el Aqqaqir, Sidi Abd el Rahman, and Ghazal in waves. The bombings scored six terrible explosions and twenty big fires. Even if the tanks were not affected by this attack, the infantry and the artillery suffered, also psychologically. The highest price paid by ACIT was the damage to the DAK's communications network.

The 2nd of November

At 0:55 the first line of the British battalions passed beyond the strips indicating the start line. Ten minutes later, the fire barrage started perfectly on time (a shell every 12 metres), moving at two and a half-minute intervals and gaps of a hundred metres. At moments, in the inferno of explosions, smoke and dust, the sound of bagpipes reached the ears of the soldiers like a familiar melody.

Faced with the rolling fire and the impact of the British infantry that followed, the static structures of the 15th *Panzer* did not hold. In the upset climate of desperate resistance and meeting of stunned men prey to hysterical crises, the 151st Infantry Brigade, supported by the *Maori* and the 8th *Royal Tanks*, overran the I/200th Infantry and the XXIII/12th *Bersaglieri* and reached its target at about 4:15. It was just half an hour later than the

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[61] *Delease* historical diary, tele 4394/Sit., 31/10/1942, 22:15 hours. Regarding transportation and fuel, Barbasetti answered Mancinelli: "*For the moment, the fuel supply is assured. The eventual operation will be executed according to the supplies. Motor vehicles are employed from Tripoli to El Daba and, if there is such a need, the supplies will increase and it will be necessary to take what is necessary to resist to the new line. Therefore, excluding the possibility of gathering a considerable number, we could be able to provide, altogether, from 150 to 170 heavy vehicles, including the portion of trailers which are supposed to reach the X Army Corps, leaving Marsa Matruh not earlier than 2 or 3 November*".

timetable. On the left, the 152nd Infantry Brigade passed through the I/115th and the II/65th Infantry, then pushed back the twenty M13s of the XII and the LI/133rd Tank Battalion with its forty *Valentines* from the 50th *Royal Tanks* and, finally, the I/8th *Panzer*. It reached its target almost at the same time as the 151st Brigade.

The *Maori* Battalion finished off the I/200th Infantry at the flanks of the penetration in the north and hastened to establish a defensive flank running north; on the opposite side, in the Kidney area, the 133rd Infantry Brigade succeeded in occupying *Woodcock*, wrapping around the I/65th Infantry and blocking the III/115th Infantry. They had had difficulties and casualties, but Freyberg's infantry had done its part. Now it was Currie's 9th Armoured Brigade's turn.

It left the assembly area near the El Alamein station at 20:00 on 1 November with about 80 *Shermans* and *Grants* and some fifty *Crusaders*. Each regiment was followed by a company of the 14th *Sherwood Forester* and an anti-tank battery. The long approaching march (eighteen km) was in the darkness and initially had extreme difficulty finding the way because of the dust clouds. Then the disadvantages of the path through the battlefield (landmines, enemy artillery fire, errors in direction, unforeseen obstacles) posed big problems for the brigade even before it got into the action.

Of the 132 tanks only 94 could start the battle, the others remained behind because of mechanical failures or because of damage in battle. Many wheeled vehicles were out of order and the losses to the *Foresters* in some cases were really serious. To make up for this stormy and unexpected beginning and subsequent delay, Freyberg conceded a delay of half an hour. So at 6:15 the batteries of the 30th and 10th Corps started the mobile barrage and the 9th Armoured Brigade advanced with the regiments in front line, followed by the 4th South African Armoured Car Brigade. The gunfire was moved a hundred metres every three minutes.

Von Thoma had prepared a semi-circular anti-tank line at a short distance from the line reached by the 151st and 152nd Brigades, that was immediately east of the Rahman Track, and a second one to the west side of the same track. There was a detachment of more than twenty 88 cannons that were part of the latter.

The duel between the batteries and the dug-in tanks of the Axis forces and the 9th Armoured Brigade was epical and confused. The first attack went favourably for the British forces thanks to darkness and the slow movement of artillery fire. But as soon as the daylight increased and there was a break between the barrage fire and the armoured forces, something new happened at once. The approach of the 1st Armoured Division led the

DAK to recover ground. Freyberg commented that: *"it was a fierce and heroic battle clashing on the line of enemy guns. In spite of the fact that the 9th Brigade had not conquered its targets and had sustained serious losses, the action was a success as the anti-tank guns defence line was broken"*[62]. The exact sensation of how hard the fighting was can be felt seeing that thirty-five Italo-German anti-tank guns were found destroyed about 100 metres from the burning tanks, some of which a few meters close to the guns. The 9th Armoured Brigade had just 19 tanks left out of the original 132 and of the 94 that joined the battle that day. The number of tanks and guns lost by the Axis forces in that battle is unknown, but the four infantry battalions involved in the sector that was attacked (two German and two Italian) could be counted as lost. Moreover, there was little left of the detachments belonging to the *Littorio* that had been engaged since the beginning. At about 10:00 the commander of the 133rd Tanks, wounded, reached the Division Headquarters and said that they had been engaged by a wave of British armour, without any warning from the infantry deployed further ahead. The battle had started fierce and confused in the midst of the lines, but the XII and LI Tank Battalions had lost most of their tanks and the DLIV Self-propelled Group had disappeared.

It is significant to notice that Rommel accepted the estimated figures about the extent of the armoured mass that had carried out the attack: 400-500 tanks with the New Zealand Infantry and 400 more east of the minefields[63].

The fact remained that the 9th Armoured Brigade had not achieved its targets[64]. According to the predictions, the DAK response was expected from north or west. Thus the objectives indicated to Briggs' 1st Armoured Division were Tell el Aqqaqir for the 8th Armoured Brigade to sustain the southern wing of the extreme southern position of 9th Armoured Brigade's line of defence, and an area about 3 km northwest of Tell for the 2nd Armoured Brigade, that is west of the aforementioned formation. The 7th Motor Brigade had to position itself at the back of the 9th Armoured, in a central position.

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[62] L. PHILLIPS, *op. cit.*, p. 290.

[63] B. LIDDELL HART, *The Rommel Papers, cit.*, p. 317.

[64] Once the regiments of the 2nd Armoured Brigade had reached the place, the commander of the 9th Lancers met Currie who pointed to the explosions and the clouds of smoke and said: *"Well, we have opened a breach in the barrage of the anti-tank cannons, and your brigade has to pass through, really quickly"*. The commander of the lancers looked at it, and then answered: *"I have never seen anything less similar to a breach, General"*. Currie answered sharply while the commander went away to report the order (from L. PHILLIPS, *op. cit.*, p. 295).

Even though Currie had stopped east of the Rahman Track, the objectives for the 1st Armoured Division remained unchanged. Briggs did not hide his worry for the ever-increasing delay in respect to the timetable and, above all, for the uncompleted manoeuvre of the 7th Armoured Brigade. His task was to overtake it by 6:45, and not to help it reach the Tell el Aqqaqir line. Currie's halt, dangerously near the infantry line, was causing an unbearably confusing situation and jamming all movements; all this happened at 7:00 in the morning in an area that was fired on by every enemy weapon.

Freyberg called Leese three times between 7:30 and 8:00. The first time it was to tell him that the 9th Armoured Brigade was having serious difficulties and that the moment was "*very serious;*" the second time to hasten Briggs' advance; the third to communicate that the two columns of the 1st Armoured Division had reached the first line of infantry troops, but enemy tanks were approaching from north and he feared he would find himself trapped with no way out.

Thus Briggs gave the order for his brigades to overtake Currie's regiments, the track and to head on to their objectives. It was easier said than done! At 9:00 the Italo-German anti-tank line that was facing the attacking troops, and that had meanwhile been reinforced, pushed back Briggs' scouts, while units of the 8th *Panzerregiment* were attacking the right flank of the 2nd Armoured Brigade and the 151st Infantry Brigade.

The general and specific circumstances in which the British night attack was carried out had made it very difficult, for a certain period of time, to reconstruct the events on behalf of ACIT and the DAK. Three facts had made things more complicated: the interruption of wire communications and the improper functioning of the wireless ones; the incursion of a couple of armoured car and light tank squadrons deep in the lines as far as west and south-west of Tell el Aqqaqir, in the heart of the night, causing disorder and damage to the groups of vehicles they encountered[65];

[65] A commander of one of the squadrons described the incursion in very coloured terms. In the darkness, the course went on very calmly, evidently due to the fact that the squadrons were believed to be Italian by the Germans and vice versa: "*In the full daylight they stared at us with surprise (...). Our enemy could not convince themselves of our presence (...). We passed by a few metres from a whole formation of field battery cannons and we reached a group of immobile Germans near their pieces who, fortunately, did not shoot. A soldier realized we were British and ran quickly to inform a colleague. They both were staring at us in disbelief*".

And so they reached the headquarters of the *Trieste* and its service units, and probably also the 164th Infantry Division. "*(...) Our enemy was so surprised that they did not even start firing. In the daylight, we started our task of destroying the enemy camp. During the first quarter of an hour, the two squadrons burnt 40 vehicles (...). Other men took possession of Italian trucks equipped with Breda heavy machine guns and so we continued the incursion. The Germans hid in the trenches nearby (...)*" (from M. CARVER, *op. cit.*, pp. 286-288).

the attempt at a sea-landing at Ras el Daba that had been pushed back without many problems, according to *Delease,* and that was actually a simulation by the Commander in Chief for Middle East.

Of the three facts, the breakdown suffered by the signal system caused serious repercussions. At first, ACIT had thought of a joint effort in favour of a main thrust repeated against the sector defended by the 90th Light. General La Ferla, who would not tolerate the splitting up of his *Trieste* (the 65th Infantry *collaborated* directly with the 15th *Panzer*, the 66th with the 164th Infantry Division, the XI Tank Battalion had been inserted into the 8th German *Panzer*, the 21st Artillery - part of which had remained with the X Corps - depended on the *Trieste* and received requests from the 164th Infantry Division), repeatedly asked for news about the 65th Infantry during the night. Until at least 3:00 the DAK answered that the British attack was going on north of the 15th *Panzer* and this confirmed the news, adding that nothing abnormal was happening in the sector of the 65th Infantry!

Around 4:00 von Thoma realized that the sector involved in the attack was really that of the 15th *Panzer*, still thinking that the manoeuvre was aiming at Sidi Abd el Rahman. However, the communications coming from the area overrun by *Supercharge* continued to be vague and confused. The only certainty was the retreat of the I/115th Infantry, of the XXIII/12th *Bersaglieri* and the I/200th Infantry[66].

Therefore, at 4:45 von Thoma ordered that the 21st *Panzer* be moved northeast towards Sidi Abd el Rahman. It is hard to say when the reality of what was happening was fully understood. Probably, for a few more hours it was clear that the front had been broken, but there was the hope that some more or less strong pockets of resistance would be able to limit the intrusion. It is enough to say that, at 12:00, the Chief of the DAK Operations Office, when asked, told La Ferla that the battle was going on "*north of the positions occupied by the 65th Infantry*" and that there was no news from either the German 115th or the 65th Infantry of the *Trieste*.

While, during the night, the counter-measures taken aimed at encircling or slowing down the enemy penetration, in the early morning it was decided to cut into it or reduce it. So, at first the immediate responses were aimed at gaining time in order to organize a major intervention, and units

[66] According to General La Ferla's report, at 8:00 Lieut. Col. Gierling, the German liaison officer, "*informed me that, according to a CTA source, there had been British infiltrations (!) at the front of the I/115 north of our 65th and there will be an attack carried out by the tank formations from northwest and west, in order to restore the situation*".

from the 15th *Panzer*, of the *Littorio* and of the 90th Light were employed for this. Some hours later the 21st *Panzer* was also thrown into the battle.

At 9:11 the 8th Army Intelligence intercepted an order from von Thoma to von Randow: the 21st *Panzer* was to attack the 151st Infantry Brigade from north. Immediately Briggs, under whose orders Currie had also passed with the units he had left, organized a wide defensive half circle that extended from Tell el Aqqaqir northwards including the 8th, 2nd and 9th Armoured Brigades. The 7th Motor Brigade also drew up, covering the northern side. Soon a duel started between the rival field and anti-tank artilleries. It could not be called an easy moment. In fact at 10:00 Freyberg called Leese on the phone and told him that the battle seemed anything but favourable and that the 1st Armoured Division was still standing in the midst of the infantries and the rest of Currie's units. The disapproval for Briggs' brigades' slow movement was clear.

Montgomery personally requested precise details and, having heard about the position taken by the 1st Armoured Division, ordered that the 8th Armoured Brigade be kept south of the 2nd. He was evaluating the picture emerging from the riddle of communications and interceptions. There is not much to say about the work of Freyberg's troops. They almost reached all the targets given to them. Well done also for the Australians: the right of the 30th Corps was not a cause for worries, even though they were facing a dangerous concentration of German troops. The one that found itself with something to worry about was the 10th Corps, which did not manage to advance, even when it had not yet met with the DAK's counterattack. On the other hand, it was significant that Rommel had not reacted with his usual immediacy. In conclusion, Montgomery not only got confirmation about the unmistakeable exhaustion of his rival, but also about their greater weakness south of the breach, where no tanks had been sighted.

Consequently, even without waiting for the outcome of the impending clash of armoured units, he issued the orders for the afternoon. The 30th Corps was to occupy a little hill in the desert called *Skinflint* (not to be confused with the objective of the same name mentioned in the *Lightfoot* plan) 2.5 km south of Tell el Aqqaqir and nearly as many kilometres south-west of Kidney, with the 152nd Scottish Infantry Brigade, and also *Snipe* with the 133rd *Sussex* Infantry Brigade. However, Leese had to prepare four brigades in reserve: the 151st *Durham*, the 154th Scottish, the 5th New Zealand and the 5th Indian. The 10th Corps received the 7th Armoured Division, including the 4th Light Armoured Brigade, which had to come swiftly from south. At midday, Montgomery went back to the tactical headquarters of the 8th Army.

Meanwhile von Thoma had launched the 21st *Panzer* and the 15th (with the remainder of the *Littorio* and the XI Tank Battalion of the *Trieste*) in a furious battle against the 1st Armoured Division which had organised a defensive stand with its tanks dug in, a plentitude of anti-tank artillery in line, a powerful mass of field and medium calibre batteries as support, and the support of seven incursions by 18 bomber planes of the *Desert Air Force*. There were about 120 Axis tanks against more than double that number of the 1st Armoured Division, without counting at least eighty *Valentines* of the 8th and 50th *Royal Tanks*. In this unbalanced duel, the M13s were literally going to the sacrifice against the *Grants* and *Shermans* and the 6-pounder guns. Rommel commented:

> "The British were blowing up the *Littorio* and *Trieste* tanks one after another. The Italian 47-mm guns were not any more effective than our 50-mm against the British tanks and signs of disintegration started to appear amongst the Italian units. The *Littorio* and *Trieste* units started moving westwards, no longer in the hands of their commanders"[67].

Surely, some incidence of retreat must have occurred but Rommel's expression seems to magnify the happening. It can be noted that the overall number of tanks belonging to the 133rd Tank Unit in the evening of 1 November, that is before the initial *Supercharge* clashes, was 38 tanks and that the only unit of the *Trieste* that was still whole, the XI Battalion (27 tanks), was nearly destroyed.

Late in the morning Colonel Westphal summoned the Chiefs of Operations branch of the three Italian corps to the tactical headquarters of ACIT. The subject of the meeting was an *eventual* retreat of the army to the Fuka line. The preamble was just suitable for the circumstance and not at all convincing; the Italians could be sure that the battle would be resumed and won as soon as the reinforcements and supplies arrived. Then Westphal came to the point. In order not to alarm the officers, he explained that as Cirenaica had been abandoned and re-conquered twice already, this would happen now with Egypt. As Germany was too busy in Russia (thus

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[67] B. LIDDELL HART, *The Rommel Papers, cit.* p. 318. D. Irving reports an annotation by Berndt in Rommel's diary: "*At night* [of 2nd] *numerous trucks and tanks of the* Littorio *Armoured Division, loaded with soldiers, were retreating in columns. Afrika Korps reports that the* Littorio *escaped the check of the officers; it simply melted away. Its elements are in full retreat. Similar symptoms are reported in regards to the infantry of the* Trieste *Motor Division* (*op. cit.* p. 244). It is useless to reveal the absurdity of the image.

it could not bother about Egypt), for the moment it was necessary to move to a defensive position behind the lines, that was sufficiently strong in its natural characteristics and that could not be attacked from south: Fuka. The retreat was *not* to be carried out before 5 November and would be protected with the technique of a retreating manoeuvre by the mechanized units. For each corps there was an indicated route to follow, lines of reference, and sectors of occupation on the Fuka position. The orders for day and time to begin the manoeuvre would follow. General Mancinelli (not present at the meeting) would supply the means of transport.

But the events quickly took another turn. The unfavourable outcome of the very hard tank battle at Tel el Aqqaqir convinced Rommel that the end was near. In the afternoon he decided to speed up the proceedings. He spoke with von Thoma and Navarini who had been summoned to the tactical headquarters of ACIT and gave orders for disengagement. Meanwhile, because of the failure of the DAK counterattack, as a first measure he commanded the movement of the *Ariete* northwards. The transfer was to take place that day so that "*at 6:00 on the 3rd the division should find itself well rested on the battlefield in the area south of Tell el Aqqaqir*". Starting at 00:00 hours on 3 November, De Stefanis resumed total command of the *Ariete*, the *Littorio* and the *Trieste*. At the same time, Nebbia took responsibility for the southern front. Furthermore, during the night the H pocket had to be evacuated by the German 125th and the X/7th *Bersaglieri* for which new positions had been allocated, south-east of Sidi Abd el Rahman.

At 15:00 von Thoma made a new attempt with the DAK, unfortunately without obtaining any concrete results. A little earlier La Ferla, who could not accept the fate of the 65th Infantry, had sent two officers to the III/115th Infantry so that they could try to reach the regiment from that stronghold. Two hours later they came back. Von Vaerst, whom they had met by chance, had convinced them not to continue as the enemy, penetrated further north, had already reached the back of the 65th and 115th Infantry. The situation was finally clear around 18:00, when the 152nd and 133rd Brigades attacked in the direction of *Skinflint* and *Snipe*. The attack succeeded without much trouble. The 152nd advanced with the 50th *Royal Tanks* and the support of eight artillery regiments and the 133rd without tanks, but the same amount of artillery. Apart from the sudden counterattack that pushed back the II/104th and the 66th Infantries, there was no illusion that there could still be anything active in the vast area of the British invasion. The physical, material and psychological exhaustion of ACIT was beginning to weigh.

Late in the afternoon von Thoma reported to Rommel. Unfortunately, the ground and air superiority of the 8th Army was becoming unstoppable. He had only 35 *Panzers* left and a third of the 88 pieces, the only weapons that could really counter the *Shermans* and *Grants*. As for the infantries, they had been reduced to less than half. Armoured units no longer existed in the Italian troops. The infantry was shaken and worn out besides ill-equipped, but the artillery could still be counted on. He concluded saying that the enemy had been halted but the troops could not hold the present positions for much longer, especially because of the continual raids of 40 or 50 British and American bombers over ACIT.

It was at this point that Rommel was convinced of the necessity of retreating to Fuka, as the whole northern sector was lost, including the minefields and the strongholds. He asked about the level of provisions and, in light of the ever more disastrous amount of petrol and ammunition reserves (news of sunken steamers continued to arrive) and the dramatic lack of means of transport, he did not hesitate any longer and cut the Gordian knot. He communicated the task for the DAK and XX Corps to von Thoma: to resist until the following day and then retreat fighting as slowly as possible in order to protect the infantry. The orders were communicated to the Italian corps shortly afterwards (around 16:00 hours). At 19:30 ACIT issued phonograms to abandon the positions starting that night of the 3rd. The X Corps had to retreat to the previous positions occupied at the end of August, before the battle of Alam el Halfa. In the centre, the XXI Corps, with *Trento* and *Bologna*, had to move to the height of the Rahman Track under protection of the XX, entrusted with supplying the vehicles! The DAK, in the north, was straightening the left wing of the 90th Light. With these measures, the front would acquire the appearance of continuity and would be ready for the retreat to follow.

However, while there were no more hesitations where the troops were concerned, the communications for the High Commands were not as clear.

Mancinelli, personally esteemed and highly respected by Rommel and the ACIT command, was not kept informed of the events with the timing, precision and duty that it was logical to expect from his allies. If his intervention was regarded as necessary to obtain something from *Delease* or the Supreme Command, Mancinelli was immediately made involved and asked; otherwise, little interest and lack of courtesy too often appeared. At about 20:00 he started to prepare the situation report *referring to 17:00 hours* on the basis of the elements in his possession. Thus, after having stressed the bitterness of the fighting, he reported that Rommel estimated that the enemy was in a position to supply the offensive with enormous

reserves, while ACIT had nearly exhausted its own. As further resistance to the imminent and certain resumption of the attack seemed difficult, the field marshal had given preventative orders *"for an eventual attempt to retreat and move onto already determined positions* [those of Fuka]. *Such a retreat will only be ordered in the case of extreme necessity"*[68].

Only when the dispatch had been sent did he come to know the executive order given by ACIT, an order that started with the sentence: *"The army is starting to retreat step by step and fighting in front of an enemy of superior strength"*. Mancinelli did not mention this specifically as it was included in the ACIT evening bulletin.

For Rommel, the real and enormous problem consisted in making Hitler accept such an intention. Knowing full well the atmosphere in Rastenburg, he wanted to proceed very gradually.

Let us start with the report sent to the Führer's headquarters that very afternoon:

> "In spite of today's defensive successes, the forces of the army are exhausted after ten days of hard fighting against the enormously superior land and air forces of the British. The army will, therefore, no longer be in a position to block the strong enemy armoured units, as it can be assumed their attempts to break through will be repeated tonight or tomorrow.
>
> The lack of motorised transport will make the retreat of the six Italian and two German non-mechanized divisions in good order impossible. A good part of these units will probably be overtaken and overrun by the enemy mechanized units. But our own mechanised units are engaged in such hard combat that only a portion of them will be able to break contact and extricate themselves (...).
>
> In such a situation the gradual destruction of the army can be assumed unavoidable in spite of the heroic resistance and a gallant fighting spirit of the troops"[69].

It is easy to see that the real intentions of Rommel are accurately disguised. As he feared a stiffening of Hitler's attitude, he was trying to get him gradually accustomed to the idea. In fact in the evening bulletin he exposed the bare facts as they were:

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[68] *Delease* Historical Diary, tele 5172, 2/11/1942, 20:50 by Gen. Mancinelli.

[69] D. IRVING, *"La pista della volpe"*, Milan, Mondadori, 1978, p. 242. Cfr. F.H. HINSLEY, *op. cit.*, p. 448.

> "We expect further attempts at breaking through by the enemy tomorrow night and the day of 3 November. As it has already been made known with the second intermediate bulletin (the one covering the situation at 17:00), the strength of the army is no longer sufficient to impede another attempt to break through.
> The army is preparing to retreat from 3 November onwards, fighting the overwhelming enemy pressure step by step. To this aim the infantry divisions will already be retreated by the night from this 2 to 3 November, to subsequently bring them back step by step"[70].

As this bulletin was sent at 22:27 on 2 November, the recipients had to accept this as a *fait accompli*.

It is evident that in both Italy and Germany Rommel's proposal to retreat, in the case of a worsening situation, was interpreted as a not unusual manifestation of pessimism, more so since Kesselring had forwarded a report not very alarming about how the battle was proceeding. In the afternoon, Cavallero received Kesselring and von Rintelen and showed them Mancinelli's message with the midday news, that is to say, with the news about the hard fighting in the Tell el Aqqaqir zone and with the remark that hundreds of British tanks were efficiently contained by ACIT[71].

> "I must state", he noted in his diary, "that I understand that our troops are tired, but the British must be exhausted too. And I will add that Rommel is in the best of conditions, as he has his forces united under him. I believe that he has no less than 250 tanks. Marshal Kesselring agrees but remarks that there is a retreat of 7 km. I answer that this should not have caused the loss of artillery (...). The situation, already serious, is now stretched to the extreme limits, but it is not desperate, and Rommel is in a position to solve it".

When Kesselring remarked that Rommel had thrown every reserve he had in the battle, Cavallero replied: "*It is his battle. He has got petrol and ammunition. The enemy thinks that Rommel has depleted all reserves and is making his last effort, but the two conditions on which they counted*

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[70] *Delease* Historical Diary, tele n. 5180, 3/11/1942, 3:40 by Gen. Mancinelli.

[71] DSCS, tele 5166, 2/11/1942, 12:40 by Gen. Mancinelli: *"The tank battle continues in the area of Tell el Aqqaqir. The enemy has probably launched several hundred tanks, but our defence is facing them very efficiently"*.

(exhaustion of petrol and ammunition) have not occurred" and, talking about a planned convoy, he went on: *"if Rommel holds on and these* [transports] *succeed in landing, then victory is assured"*[72]. Later, Rome received a telegram from Barbasetti at about 21:00, inquiring about *"orders given or about to be given to Rommel by the Supreme Command for the development of the battle and, above all, about the lines to be held in case of retreat"*[73]. Cavallero's answer was immediate and absolutely non-committal: *"The battle is led by Marshal Rommel and you are to keep in contact with him and send news frequently"*[74].

The 3rd of November

At 8:00 in the morning, Cavallero informed Mussolini about the news received during the night: the aforementioned telegram by Mancinelli with the situation up to 17:00 of the previous day (received at about 2:00) and the ACIT evening bulletin (received at about 4:00). Mussolini's remarks are not known[75]. It is a fact that when Kesselring phoned the Supreme Command at 8:45 to inform them that he was ready to leave for Egypt because of the serious situation and prospects, Cavallero was able to take a position, or at least express his point of view (!):

> "I believe that it is advisable to keep the present positions in Egypt as those indicated by Marshal Rommel are not suited for defence. I invite Marshal Kesselring to carry out a persuasive action in this sense with Marshal Rommel"[76].

After the two telephone conversations, Cavallero swiftly reviewed the situation with his main staff. Then he had two messages sent, the first to the General Staff liaising with ACIT and the second to *Delease*.

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[72] Cavallero's Diary, 2/11/1942.

[73] *Delease* Historical Diary, tele 4516/Sit., 2/11/1942, 18:45 hours.

[74] *Ibid.*, tele 33344/Op., 2/11/1942, 21:15 by the Supreme Command.

[75] Cavallero's diary attests to the phone call of Cavallero with two annexes. Regarding Rommel's "communication", there is Mancinelli's tele n. 5178 sent at 9:15 of 3 November from the front: *"Ruggero* [=Rommel] *has not made any final decision. But it is probable that there will be a retreat along meridian 28 at first, subsequently at Marsa Matruh (...)"*. Regarding Mancinelli's communication, he adds the situation at 14:00 of the 3rd sent by Mancinelli himself at 14:30. It is clear that the collocation of the two annexes is wrong. The two communications quoted in the diary are respectively: ACIT evening bulletin (tele 5180, 3/11/1942, 3:40 hours by Mancinelli) and the situation report at 17:00 of 2 November (tele 5172, 2/11/1942, 20:50), both already mentioned.

[76] Cavallero's Diary, 3/11/1942.

"Please let Rommel know", he wrote to Mancinelli, "that the Duce regards holding the present front as necessary at all costs since, according to the opinion of the Supreme Command, the Egyptian territory only offers suitable positions for layovers and temporary resistance in order to reorganize the forces. As an extreme precaution, *Delease* has already received orders to put together the positions at Sollum-Halfaya with few units and available artillery. It is understood that for this activity no unit that is earmarked for ACIT will be employed.
Supplies are being forwarded by all available means, by air and by sea"[77].

He then informed Barbasetti of all this and this time he expressed his ideas regarding the course of battle much better. In his opinion, it was necessary to resist in El Alamein to the bitter end. If there were need to retreat, the only natural line of defence was offered by the Sollum-Halfaya position. If Rommel were forced to perform a retreating manoeuvre between El Alamein and the border, only he could decide. Kesselring, arriving shortly after, would also discuss this matter.

Moreover, at 10:50, a long message transmitted by Berlin to the German embassy in Rome, asking for an urgent meeting with Rommel, had been intercepted. The ACIT evening bulletin of 2 September, received by von Rintelen at 2:00 on the 3rd and re-transmitted immediately to the OKW, was not shown to Hitler until 9:00 in the morning due to a mistake of the officer on duty. There was an immediate counter-order, accompanied by an explosion of anger:

"To Field Marshal General Rommel.
With full trust in your skills as a leader and in the valour of the German and Italian troops at your orders, the German people are following the

[77] DSCS, tele 33346/Op., 3/11/1942, 11:10 hours. It must be said that there is an arbitrary temporal alteration of facts as it is shown in the diary published with the title of *Comando Supremo*, Bologna, Cappelli, 1948, p. 364. According to this publication, the sequence of the actions in the evening of 2 November would be the following:

1. Mancinelli's telegram with the situation report at 17:00 (tele 5172);

2. Cavallero's answer, on behalf of Mussolini, to stop Rommel *by all means* on the front of El Alamein (tele 33346/Op.);

3. Conversation with Kesselring and von Rintelen.

To tell the truth, both telegrams belong to the 3rd and not to the 2nd November and there is no sign of them in the original text of the diary on that date. Indeed, Mancinelli's tele 5172 was filled in at 20:50 of the 2nd and reached Rome at night. Cavallero's tele 33346 was completed at 11:10 on the 3rd and does not respond to the situation at 17:00 of the 2nd but the ACIT evening bulletin, arrived in Rome in the early morning of the 3rd, sent to both the Supreme Command and von Rintelen by different means.

heroic struggle in Egypt along with me. In your situation, there can be no other thought outside of continuing to resist. So, do not give up one single step and throw every weapon and combatant that is still available into the battle.

A considerable number of reinforcements will be sent in these days to the Commander in Chief of the South. Even the Duce and the Supreme Command will do their best to have the means reach you in order to continue the fight.

Despite his superiority in numbers, even the enemy will come to the end of his strength. It would not be the first time in history that the strongest will triumphs over the strongest enemy battalions. However, you cannot indicate any other way to your troops besides that which leads to victory or death".

Mussolini was almost simultaneously informed about the message by Cavallero and, officially, by von Rintelen. He approved the telegram sent by the Supreme Command through Mancinelli to Rommel without hesitation. Nobody wondered if the decision of staying in place was compatible with the retreat or not, which was, in all probability, already underway.

In fact, during the night, the first contact was lost and the first retreat toward the 850th meridian took place[78] west of the Tell el Ghazal-Deir el Murra alignment, taking advantage of the absence of a British response.

The X Corps had received a warning order for the retreat to Fuka at 17:00 of the 2nd. As the phonogram was very concise, Nebbia asked for an explanation of the movement and, particularly, of the time available to reach the new positions. Unfortunately, from that moment on, the German radio connection with ACIT could no longer make contact. In any case, the army corps managed to disengage and have the *Pavia* and *Brescia* withdraw by midday of the 3rd, without problems, as the moonlight and the short distance (about 15 kilometres) allowed for numerous trips with the available vehicles. The same happened with the *Ramcke* Brigade. The *Folgore*, on the other hand, was forced to abandon its positions, after destroying most of the heavy weapons and equipment.

The XXI Corps also had a difficult situation, as the infantry of the *Trento* and the *Bologna* had no means of transportation, and was thus forced to drag the 47/30 pieces manually and carry all the weapons on their backs. The movement of the XX Corps toward Deir el Murra began

[78] It deals with meridian 850 of the orthographical kilometric network reported on the Egyptian cartography.

in the early morning, but due to the fact that the *Trieste* was strongly engaged and the *Ariete* had not yet arrived from south, the withdrawal could only be completed during the night of the 4th.

In the southern sector, the units of the 164th German Infantry Division, which were spread a little bit all over the place, gathered south of Tell el Aqqaqir. The DAK - which had easily repelled the uncoordinated action of the 7th Motor Brigade in Tell el Aqqaqir - remained drawn up in a semi-circle from south-east to the north-east of the city. The 90th Light limited itself to getting back to the direct protection of Sidi Abd el Rahman. Points were established along the coastal road controlled by the 90th Light: the 125th German Infantry from the 164th Infantry Division in Sidi Abd el Rahman, the X/7th *Bersaglieri* from the *Trento*, halfway between that place and Tell el Ghazal, where the new I/39th Infantry from the *Bologna* had been brought, and the 3rd German Scout Group and the new I/62nd from the *Trento* in El Daba.

> "The battle is unfolding very unfavourably for us", Rommel wrote to his wife that night. "We are simply being crushed by the superior power of the enemy. I tried everything to save at least a part of the army. I'm wondering if I'll manage. At night, I lie on my bed with my eyes wide open searching for a solution to get my poor soldiers out of this trouble. We are experiencing very difficult days, perhaps worse than a man can bear. The dead are lucky: everything is over for them (...)"[79].

The lack of a reaction by the British and, consequently, the unexpected conditions which allowed many units to break contact led to hope that, once the DAK and the 90th Light (i.e. the most engaged units) had broken contact as well, the retreat would go on without excessive risk. However, Rommel had a valid reason to worry about Hitler's decision; he was not calm and was afraid that the African events would be judged without an exact idea of the strategic, tactical and logistic context. He then decided to send his aide-de-camp, Lieutenant Berndt, to the Führer's headquarters and have him personally explain that North Africa was probably lost, but his intention was to avoid a disastrous clash and prepare a series of battles on successive positions until the circumstances allowed them to engage the enemy in battle or until he could embark all of his troops and bring them back to Europe.

At about 10:00, he went to the advanced command post and talked to von Thoma. The DAK had about 30 *Panzers* left but the enemy was not

[79] B. LIDDELL HART, *The Rommel Papers, cit.*, p. 320.

showing any particular aggressiveness. Assuming that the enemy would still be busy reorganizing his formations and that there was still a margin of time to take advantage of, Rommel made the decision to retreat to Fuka. The movement had to progress by sectors, in the following succession: northern, central and southern, with priority given to the non-motorised groups of the first two sectors, under armoured protection. The *Ramcke* Brigade and the X Corps would stay in place for the moment.

Relieved for having thrown the dice, Rommel went back toward El Daba. He had miraculously survived an air incursion but, when he reached the ACIT Headquarters at about midday, he probably regretted that he had. Just like two shots at him, he was given the dispatch from the Supreme Command with an invitation to *"maintain by all means the present front"* and the letter from Hitler expressing the only alternatives were victory or death[80]. It was a heavy blow for him. He did not dare to disobey *sic et simpliciter* and searched for the right words to reply to the OKW in a respectful and persuasive way. After many attempts, he chose this version:

> "With reference to the telegram of 3 November, 11:30 hours, I report that during the night of 2 to 3 November, the Italian divisions and *Ramcke* Brigade retreated to the southern sector of El Taqa-Bab el Qattara south of Deir el Murra, with the intention of shortening the front. They had been ordered to defend themselves by all means.
> The German divisions are presently involved in extremely heavy fightings in the northern sector against definitely superior enemy forces. All the German units had already been involved in the struggle. The present German losses of infantry, tank destroyers and engineers amount to about 50% and 40% of artillery. Currently, the DAK only has 24 tanks at its disposal. The *Littorio* and the *Trieste* of the XX Corps have practically been destroyed. The *Ariete,* which had remained in the southern sector until now, reached the DAK during the night.
> Every possible effort will be made to keep possession of the battlefield"[81].

In the meantime, at 14.30, he asked von Thoma for further information. The latter let him know, quite sharply, that the 15th *Panzer* could only count on 10 tanks, the 21st on 14 and the *Littorio* on 17. Rommel urged him

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[80] At 14:30 General Mancinelli sent a telegraph to the Supreme Command and to *Delease: "Situation at 14:00. There is nothing particular to report" (DSCS, 3/11/1942).*

[81] Tele 133/42, 3/11/1942, no date-time group.

to fight to the last tank and read him Hitler's message, to which the embittered von Thoma proposed what seemed an acceptable formula: resistance on the positions with some inevitable local downsizing (Sketch N. 52).

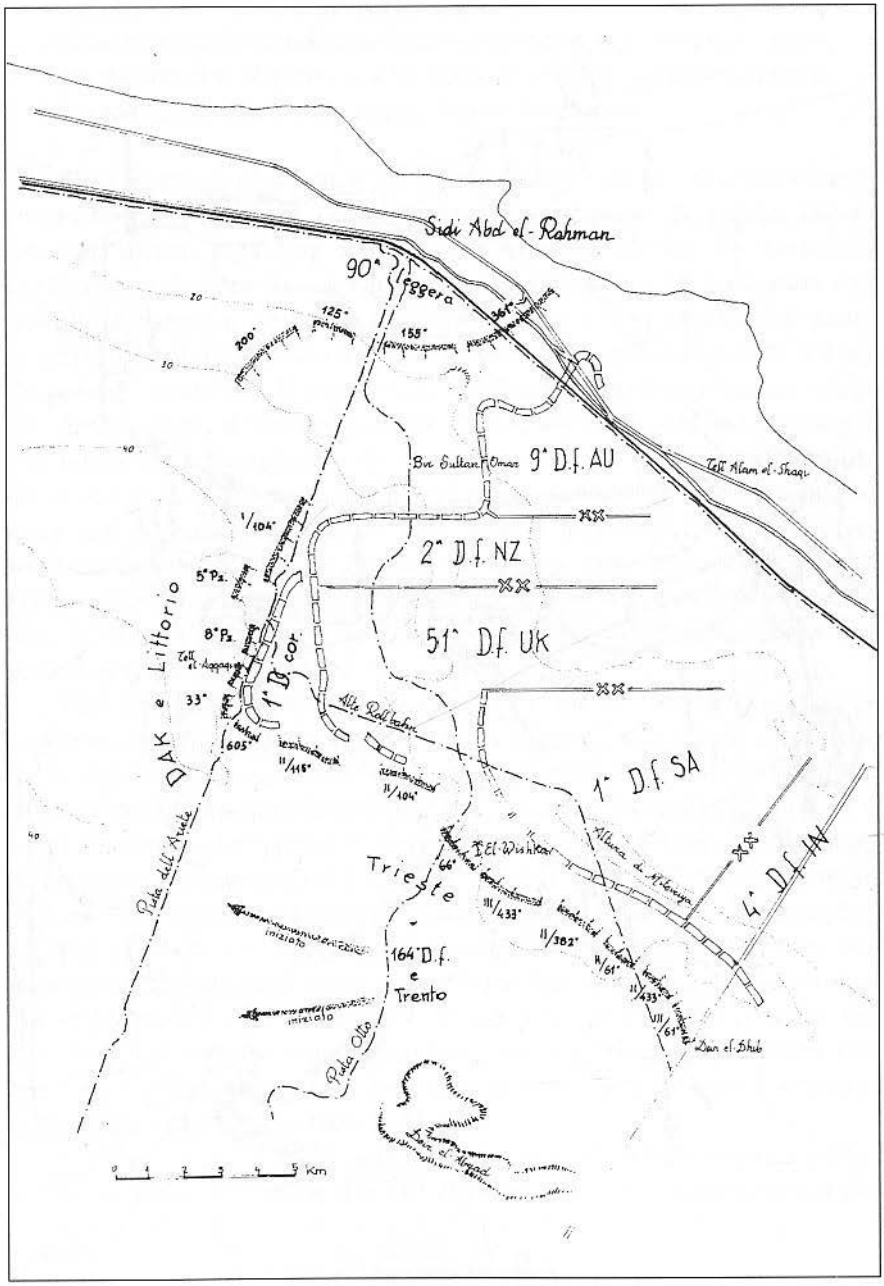
However, it was necessary to suspend the arranged movements, redirect the formations and the armoured divisions in line, and recover the X Corps (Sketch N. 53). At 15:10, ACIT transmitted the orders to the XXI Corps, but the impossibility of a timely and correct execution was immediately clear. The phonogram reached the army corps at 17:00 and the consequent coded dispositions were only issued to the divisions at 18:30. There were no difficulties for the *Trento*, which had not left its positions yet, but things were different for the *Bologna*. It had been marching since 14:00 and was unable to receive and decode communications before reaching its destination. Navarini, once he realized this, had some officers sent to along the planned retreat route, but the *Bologna* headquarters could not be found, as it had decided to precede the columns in order to examine the dispositions to be assumed on the Fuka line. The formation was only found at dawn and after a laborious search. As one can imagine, the troops were so exhausted that they were not able to make their way back. As for the XX Corps, ACIT ordered stationing the *Ariete* south-east of Deir el Murra, with the 15th *Panzer* on the left and the *Trento* from the XXI Corps on the right.

Rommel had well imagined the negative effect of the counter-order on the units, because "*even the last soldier knew at that point that, even making the greatest effort, the fate of the battle could no longer change*"[82]. At 18:40, he asked the corps commanders to do what was humanly possible to conclude the battle favourably. Probably the aim would be achieved by keeping control of the battlefield - that is, by victoriously repelling any British attempt at a breach - and so he specified to von Thoma that Hitler's order "*excludes any type of flexible defence*".

Mancinelli informed the Supreme Command of Rommel's painful determination, but he did not explicitly attribute it to the intervention of Berlin and Rome. On the contrary, he inserted a "*for the moment*" that would be to say that Rommel had not lost all hope of saving ACIT:

[82] E. ROMMEL, *op. cit.*, p. 284. It is worth underlining the fact that the X Corps had a different psychological atmosphere compared to other army corps. It is due to the fact that, after the violent attacks during the first days, all repelled with heavy losses, an operational stasis took place. The order to retreat surprised the troops that manifested their regret at having to leave the solid positions defended in such a brilliant way.

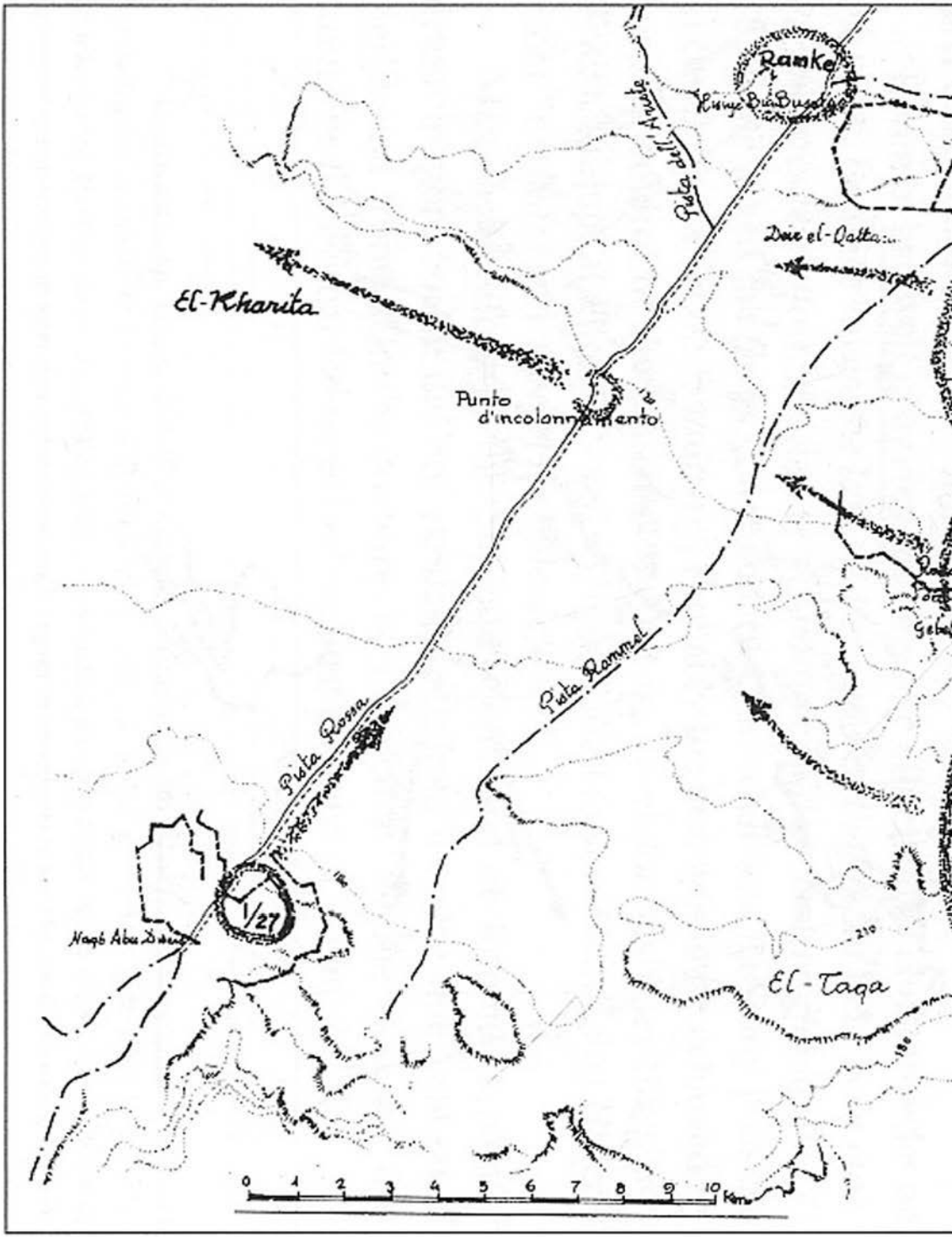
Sketch N. 52
"THE SITUATION IN THE NORTHERN SECTOR
AT 15:00 ON 3 NOVEMBER"



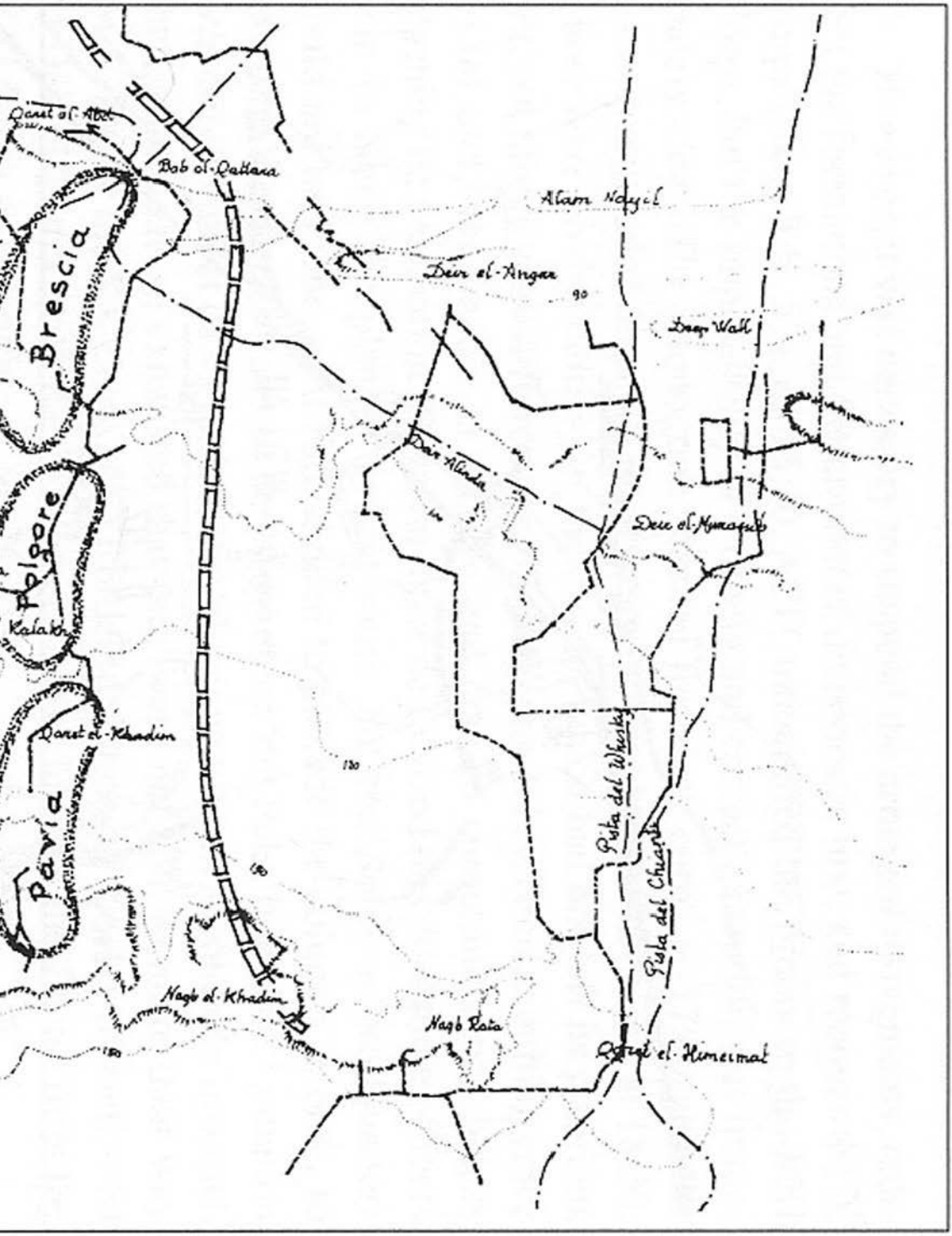
Sketch N

"THE SITUATION OF TH

IN THE EVENING OF



. 53
HE X ARMY CORPS
F 3 NOVEMBER"



"Situation at 16:30. Rommel, having contemplated the extreme difficulty of retreating under the pressure of the abundantly motorized enemy, decided to give up the retreat for the moment and attempt to resist in place. He will play his last card on the ACIT occupied positions. The only chance for success is to inflict such serious losses on the enemy as to make them abandon the idea of an offensive (...). We learned from an interception that there is a new strong attack being prepared on the DAK front"[83].

That morning, at about 9:30, Montgomery had met the army corps commanders. There was contradictory news, coming from the Tell el Aqqaqir sector, regarding the effort conducted by the 1st Armoured Division, but it generally seemed that the German anti-tank formation was still efficient, which was not exactly comforting. It even seemed that many generals judged the situation critical and were asking themselves how long the pressure could last. It was already the eleventh day of the furious struggle. At that point, it was not possible to lose the battle, but not winning it was not entirely improbable. On the other hand, the predominance of the *Royal Air Force* was undeniable and there were many valid reasons to think that Rommel's resources were almost depleted. The day before, some messages decoded by *Enigma* let Montgomery know Rommel and *Fliegerführer* had already reported that the situation was unbearable a few days before. In addition, it was known that the Italo-German troops had started to retreat.

The first indications were gathered by the 9th Australian Infantry Division, then by the 13th Corps to the south, and finally by air reconnaissance that found there was an increasing movement westwards along the coastal road and a strong flow from the front, along the tracks in the desert. Later on, further decryption of *Enigma* messages confirmed that Rommel had ordered the disengagement of the infantry divisions during the night of the 3rd and had the intention of starting a real retreat as of the same day, fighting every inch of the way. The *Fliegerführer,* in the meantime, was moving the aircraft to airports further back behind the lines. To complete the ACIT picture: the availability of fuel was inferior to 1.7 units, the movement of artillery ammunition from the warehouses in El Daba was impossible due to the lack of fuel and the extremely low level of provisions at the large logistic base in Matruh.

But the retreat of ACIT was the last thing that Montgomery wanted, and so at midday he chose the 51st *Highlanders* as the spearhead for the

[83] DSCS, tele 5198, 3/11/1942, 19:50, by Gen. Mancinelli.

final blow. His orders were meant to surround the last obstacle, that is to say the DAK, rather than destroy it. Getting past the German anti-tank barrage had to be implemented by attacking the southern sector, which was clearly not very deep. The protagonist of this first part, the 51st *Highlanders,* was supposed to surpass the Rahman Track, creating the premise for enveloping the DAK from south. The second part was entrusted to the 2nd New Zealand Infantry Division, completed with the 4th Light Armoured Brigade. The results achieved by the 51st *Highlanders* had to be exploited to reach the depth of Sidi Ibeid, behind the XX and XXI Italian Corps (Sketch N. 54).

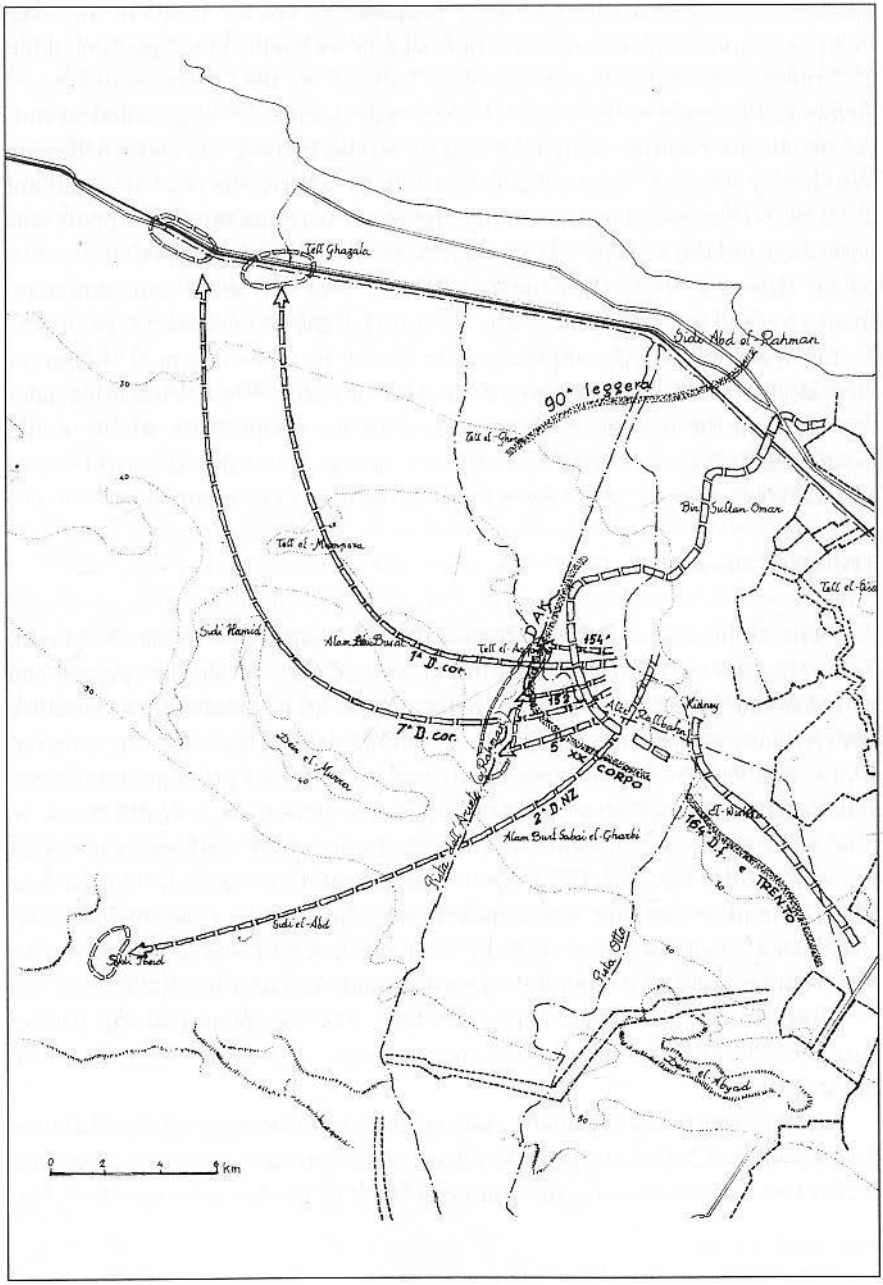
Once these results had been obtained, the completion of the success could begin. In the evening, Montgomery, informed by other decrypted *Enigma* messages that Rommel had renounced breaking camp, gave the orders to Lumsden. The 10th Corps had been rearranged in view of the precise task to be conducted over three divisions of the same structure. Briggs's 1st Armoured Division had the 2nd Armoured Brigade and the 7th Motor Brigade; Harding's 7th Armoured Division had the 22nd Armoured Brigade and the 131st Motor Brigade at its disposal; Gatehouse's 10th Armoured Division had the 8th Armoured Brigade and the 133rd Motor Brigade. Each division could then count on an armoured car regiment, artillery, engineers and services. In addition there was a group of armoured cars: the *Royal Dragoons*, the 3rd and the 4th South African Regiments. The 1st Armoured Division would then move from Tell el Aqqaqir toward the Ghazala station followed on the left side by the 7th Armoured Division[84].

Moreover, Freyberg would have to go towards Fuka and Wimberley would move south-west of Tell el Aqqaqir to replace the New Zealanders.

According to the above dispositions, General Wimberley received the order to prepare three separate attacks. The first one, at 17:45 of that same evening, would occupy the Rahman Track, just a few kilometres south of Tell el Aqqaqir with the 152nd Infantry Brigade; the second, at 1:30 on 4 November, would take the 5th Indian immediately south of the 152th Infantry Brigade, also astride the Rahman Track; the third, at 6:15 on 4 November, would attack Hill 44 near Tell el Aqqaqir with the 154th

[84] In the meantime, Operation *Grapeshot* had been arranged. It foresaw a hasty rush of a big motorized and armoured formation towards Tobruk, to capture the territory before the defence was organized. The forces to be used for such operation were: the 8th Armoured Division Headquarters (General Gairdner), the 23rd Armoured Brigade, the 5th Mounted Artillery, a motorized battalion and a machinegun battalion, anti-tank, anti-craft and engineer units. These formations had to be joined by the *Royal Dragoons* and the 4th African Armoured Cars. But due to the course of events the idea was abandoned.

Sketch N. 54
"THE ORDERS ISSUED BY MONTGOMERY
IN THE AFTERNOON OF 3 NOVEMBER"



Brigade. In the meantime, the 9th Australian would clear the coastal sector abandoned by the enemy.

The attack by the 152nd Infantry Brigade had to be preceded by an intense air raid and a strong artillery preparation, but the frequent mistakes of a topographical nature and the confusing news led the Headquarters of the 1st Armoured Division to consider the Track left by the Germans and the 8th Armoured Brigade to the west. Consequently, General Briggs asked to cancel the air intervention which, he feared, would involve his units. Although Wimberley informed Leese that, according to reports, the objective had not at all been abandoned by the enemy, the result was that the fire support was abolished and the 8th *Royal Tanks* advanced with part of the *Gordons* mounted on *Valentine tanks*. But the 15th *Panzer* was still there and moreover, thanks to field interceptions, it was informed of the imminence of the attack. So the operation failed completely. The British lost 94 soldiers, 9 *Valentines* were destroyed and 11 damaged of the 32 total tanks. When Wimberley, later on, received the indications from Leese for the cooperation which would assure the 11th Indian Infantry Brigade's attack, he could not stop himself from asking: "*Do we really have to continue attacking in this way?*"[85].

The 4th of November

The night action of the 5th Indian Brigade, supported by the 50th *Royal Tanks*, had seemed ill-fated from the very start. First of all, the brigade had to reach the Miteiriya sector, something that made punctuality doubtful, which therefore led to delaying the scheduled time of the attack by an hour. It also had to move across unknown territory, without previous reconnaissance and in the darkness of the night. As compensation, it could count on nine field artillery regiments, two of medium calibre and, even if it was unaware of the fact, the 15th *Panzer* was retreating towards Deir el Murra. The German sector that was attacked was the II/115th *Panzergrenadiere*, which lost about 180 men. At 8:00 the 5th Indian had reached its objective (even though one of its battalions got lost and arrived after 20:00).

The third action went very smoothly. The Germans had left Tell el Aqqaqir, therefore, at about 8:00, the position was taken practically without a struggle.

According to Montgomery, taking the six kilometres of the Rahman Track south of Tell el Aqqaqir had been of paramount importance because it allowed for surrounding the southern flank of the German anti-tank for-

[85] L. PHILLIPS, *op. cit.*, p. 316.

mation, which no direct effort had been able to neutralise. And the first step backward of the DAK's retreat allowed Lumsden's 10th Corps to spread out. It did not exactly follow this course, since in the morning of the 4th ACIT still dominated the abandoned area of Tell el Aqqaqir from afar. It was clear, though, that ACIT had its days numbered.

The retreat towards the 850th meridian had caused a drawback: large holes in the continuity of movement of troops that dominated a large semi-circular area, now held by the DAK, from the XX to XXI Corps, not to mention a 15 kilometre gap between the XXI and the X Corps right in the middle of the front, as they were gathering east of El Kharita. The armoured cars of the *Royal Dragoons* and of the South Africans were taking advantage of this freedom of movement to confuse and disorientate the rearguard of the XXI and X Corps.

At 7:30 Kesselring arrived in Africa. Forced to spend the night in Crete due to some trouble with his plane, he later regretted this involuntary delay: *"The result (...) obtained on 4 November would have had a much greater impact, perhaps decisive, a day before"*[86]. He was welcomed by *Fliegerführer* Seidemann, who immediately took him to Rommel.

The ACIT commander, who was convinced that Hitler had been biased by the OBS' unjustifiable optimism, greeted his guest coldly. He was indignant at the order he had been given to keep a grip on El Alamein. He was worried about the conditions of the coastal road, which was continuously being bombed by the *Royal Air Force* and was partly jammed by burning vehicles, although traffic went on in a fairly ordered fashion, and he was unsure about Lieutenant Berndt's mission. And the enemy seemed to be resting on its laurels! *"I would have never dared to hope"*, he remarked, *"that the British commander would have let such an opportunity pass by. Now it was passing and we were not taking advantage of it"!*[87] The meeting with Kesselring started with a controversial tone.

Kesselring started by defending Hitler's idea, and tried to justify it, explaining it with the experiences gained on the Russian front, where holding on to a desperate position had been the best solution on many occasions. Rommel replied:

> "I had believed until now that the Führer left me in command of the army. This senseless order has had the effect of a bomb on us. He can-

[86] A. KESSELRING, *op. cit.*, p. 137.
[87] E. ROMMEL, *op. cit.*, p. 285.

not simply apply his convictions mostly acquired from the experiences gained in Russia to the war in Africa. He should definitely have left this decision to me"[88].

According to Rommel's memoirs, the conversation ended with this bitter outburst. Actually, the conversation continued but in a very different way. When Kesselring learnt that the DAK had only about 20 operative *Panzers* left and had gained a better perspective of the situation, he reacted immediately and did not hesitate to suggest *"considering Hitler's message as more of an appeal than a precise command"*. Such a suggestion caught Rommel by surprise, so much so that the only thing he could reply was that to him the Führer's telegram did not seem to leave him any choice. But Kesselring insisted on trying to convince him to act the way he deemed right in those circumstances, because *"it can't be that the Führer wants his army to be annihilated here at El Alamein"*. Then, since Rommel did not seem to dare contravene the order received, Kesselring came up with a new proposal: to address the OKW again, explaining the impossibility of keeping the El Alamein line due to the losses and the overwhelming power of the 8th Army, and stating that the only way to keep at least part of Northern Africa would be through a strategic retreat. He added that he himself would promote such a solution with a personal message to Hitler. So it was done[89].

Rommel's message went as follows:

"In the last day the enemy, with 400-500 tanks and strong infantry forces, opened a ten kilometre by fifteen kilometre deep breach through the most important sector of the battlefield, almost completely destroying the troops on the front line.

We are doing whatever we can to keep possession of the battlefield, but our losses are so great that we will not be able to count on a continuous front for long.

I am absolutely convinced that we need to keep our positions to the end without yielding a step. But I believe that the British tactics, to destroy our units one by one with the most devastating concentration of fire, and their persistent air attacks, can only lead to the progressive destruction of our forces.

[88] *Ibid.*, p. 286.

[89] A. KESSELRING, *op. cit.*; B. LIDDELL HART, *The Rommel Papers*, p. 322, notes by Manfred Rommel; D. IRVING, *op. cit.*, pp. 247-248.

> In the present situation the only solution I can see is a manoeuvred combat, in which our enemy will have to fight at every step. This is the only possibility we have to inflict further losses and avoid them ourselves in the African theatre.
> I request your authorisation to this end. Should it be granted, I intend to retreat in an orderly fashion bringing the troops, through subsequent phases, to a new line running southwards from Fuka. On this 70-kilometre line, the southern sector cannot be crossed for about 30 kilometres by large armoured formations"[90].

After this meeting, Rommel went to the DAK Headquarters under the nearly uninterrupted whirl of British bombers and fighters. Once there, he was immediately informed of the feebleness of the front, but apparently the enemy had not moved the artillery forward yet, and the effort of the 10th British Corps had come to a halt.

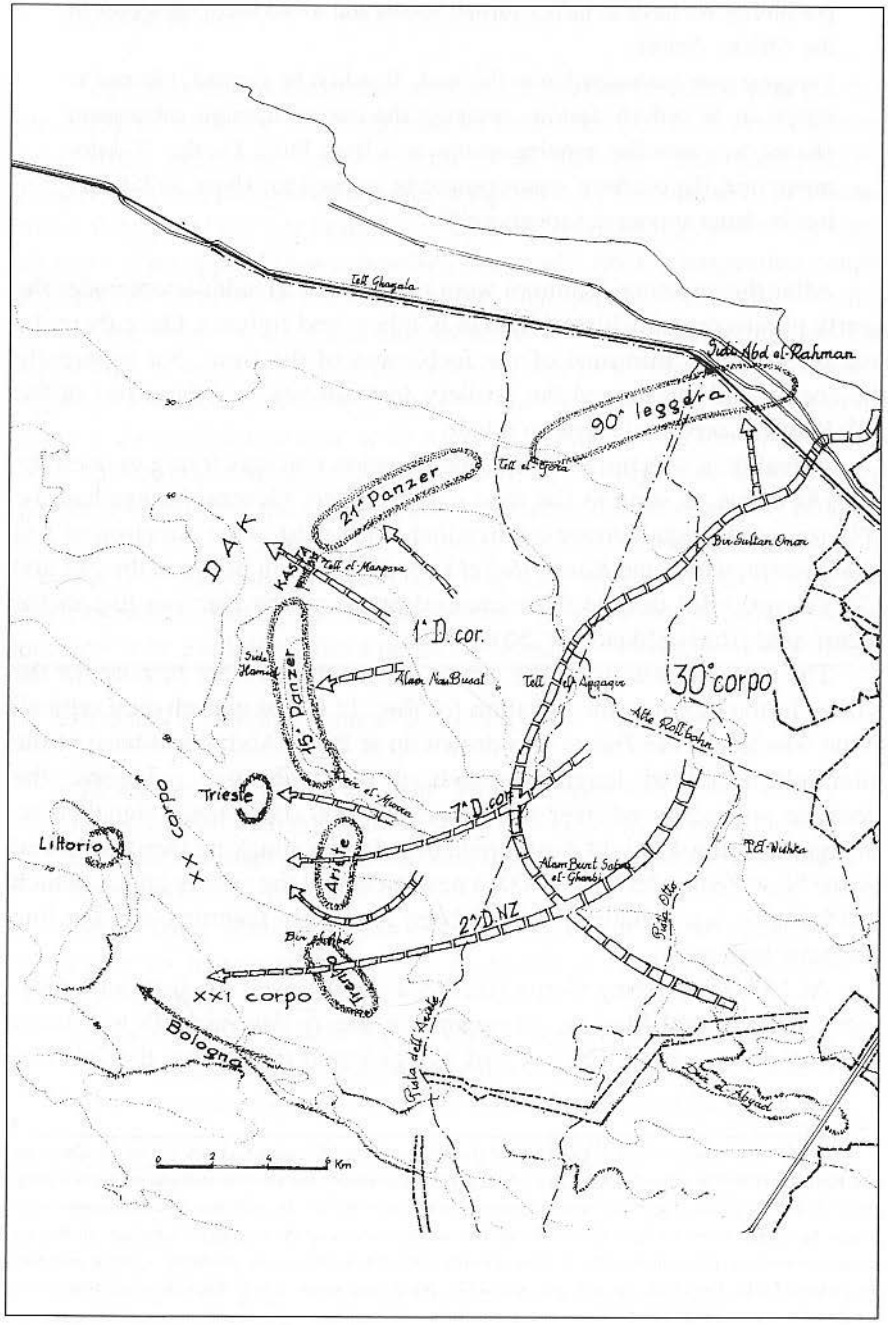
In reality, it was the 1st Armoured Division that was trying to open the way. At dawn, as soon as the mist had dispelled, General Briggs had the 2nd Armoured Brigade move out heading north-west in the direction of Tell el Mampsra, where the *Kampfstaffel* kept the junction between the 21st and 15th *Panzers*. But despite the increased pressure, the German line in the sector held firmly (Sketch N. 55).

The opposite was so at the centre, where things were turning for the worse. In the morning the situation for the 21st Corps was already critical. What was left of the *Trento* was drawn up at Bir el Abd, north-west of the minefield extended lengthwise behind the resistance positions; the *Bologna* was scattered over the desert. At 7:00, the *Trento* signalled its engagement: the 4th Light Armoured Brigade was attacking them, followed by the New Zealanders. At 11:00, a new message: the enemy attack, which had initially been challenged, had been forcefully resumed and the line was now broken.

At 13:00, the Army Corps Headquarters received the last radio message from General Masina: *"Ammunition nearly depleted. We will shoot them all on the spot"*. Once it had overpowered the *Trento*, the 2nd New

[90] The text reported here is the faithful translation of the German text, shown to Cavallero by von Rintelen (Cfr. Cavallero's Diary, 4/11/1942). On the contrary, the English version includes a paragraph dedicated to Italians: "*We cannot expect new German forces. In addition, the Italian troops no longer have the ability to fight due to the enormous superiority of the enemy on land and in the air. Some elements of the Italian infantry have already abandoned the secure positions without awaiting the orders* (I.S.O. PLAYFAIR, *op. cit.*, pp. 476-477). We do not know if von Rintelin's paper had been designed *ad usum Delphini*.

Sketch N. 55
"THE FIGHT ON 4 NOVEMBER IN THE NORTHERN SECTOR"



Zealand sent the armoured cars and light tanks to track down the *Bologna*, taking the units that were retreating on foot in total exhaustion by surprise, easily disbanding them and taking prisoners.

As for De Stefanis' XX Corps, the situation was equally dramatic. The *Ariete* Armoured Division had arrived that morning between Deir el Murra and Bir el Abd, that is between the 15th *Panzer* and the *Trento*, and, having left some units with the 10th Corps, it now had at its disposal: the XII/8th *Bersaglieri*, the 132nd Tank Regiment over three battalions and about a hundred medium tanks, and the 132nd Artillery over four groups of various calibres. The remainder of the *Trieste* was a little further north-west: the 66th Infantry over two battalions and the 21st Artillery over three groups, all in very reduced ranks and short of provisions and munitions since part of the supplies had been sent with a few vehicles to Fuka. The rest of the *Littorio* was further west: a formation battalion of the 12th *Bersaglieri* in two companies and a couple of 100/17 artillery howitzers. The tanks of the 133rd Tank Regiment that had survived were fighting with those of the 15th *Panzer*.

At about 10:00 De Stefanis was attacked by the 7th Armoured Division led by the 22nd Armoured Brigade (Sketch N. 56). The *Ariete* had organised a little anti-tank line and was supported by the artillery from the *Trieste*, but the struggle was extremely uneven. The *Shermans* halted at 1500 metres and started their clay-pigeon shooting against the M13s, which were left with no choice but move forward to shorten the range.

The fight was long and relentless. An enveloping manoeuvre from south around the artillery by a portion of the 4th Armoured Light Brigade ended the match[92].

At 13:00 Rommel received other bad news from Col. Bayerlein, who had returned from a round of reconnaissance: the 15th and the 21st *Panzers*

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[91] The 133rd Tankmen had formed a battalion by putting together about twenty tanks: 5 left, others taken from the workshops and all the tanks used as command posts or radio centres that were found. The aim was to give the impression of an efficient formation.

[92] According to de Guingand, while the success of *Supercharge* was emerging (that is to say in the late morning), von Thoma called Rommel and told him that south of the DAK the enemy had broken the front. Rommel answered that he doubted the accuracy of the report, as Navarini had not reported anything to him. He then thought it might be the *Trieste*. But *"The Italians"*, observed de Guingand, *"were probably in such a state of panic that they thought anyone could know what was happening"* (*op. cit.*, p. 208). Von Thoma then decided to go and check personally. This reconstruction of events is quite different from the summaries made by Rommel and Bayerlein. Anyway, though the Italian headquarters were bewildered, as it was stated by de Guingand, their radio messages reached the ACIT Headquarters and the DAK. It was then learnt that the *Trento* held on until 13:00, and the *Ariete* and the *Trieste* until at least 15:30.

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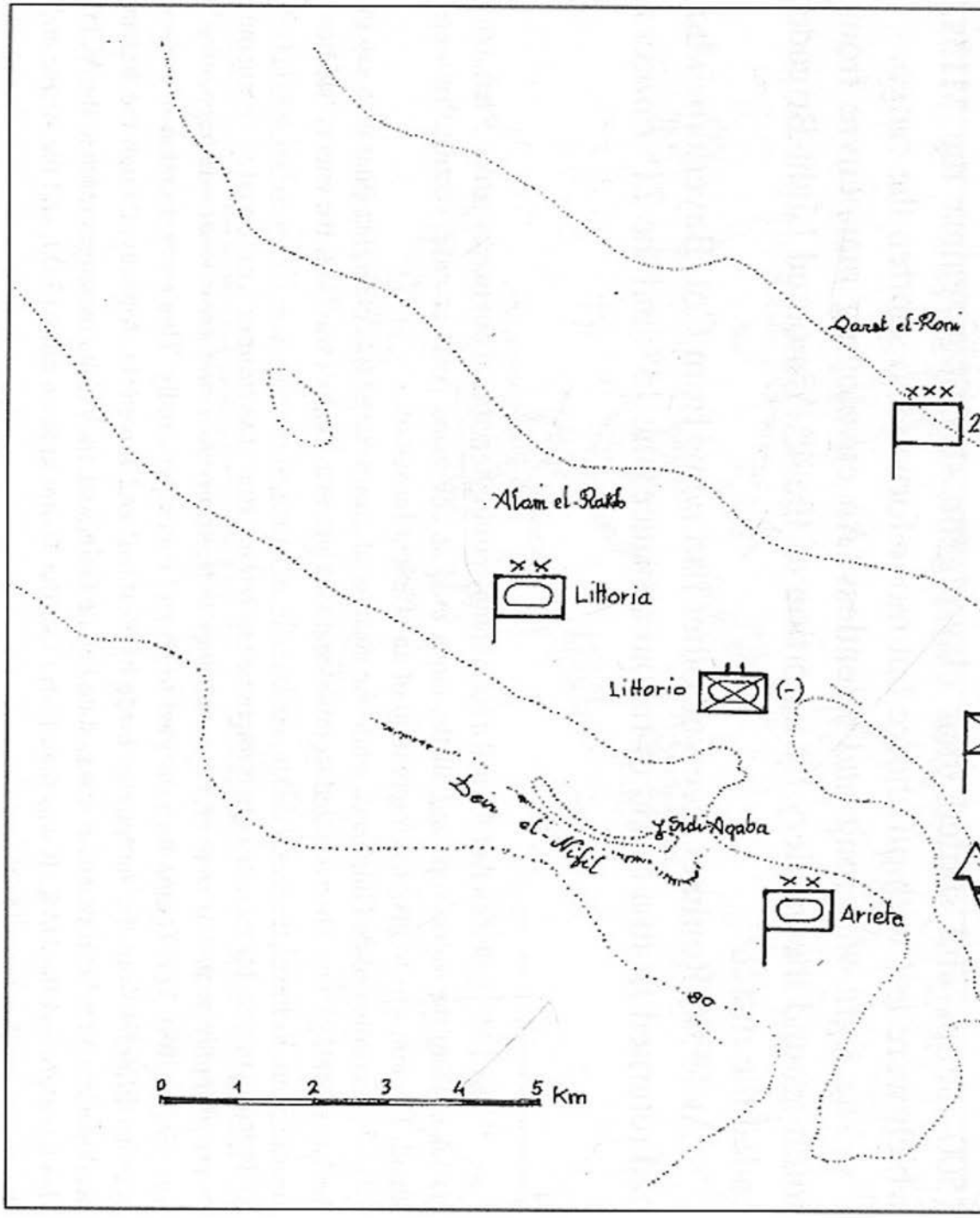
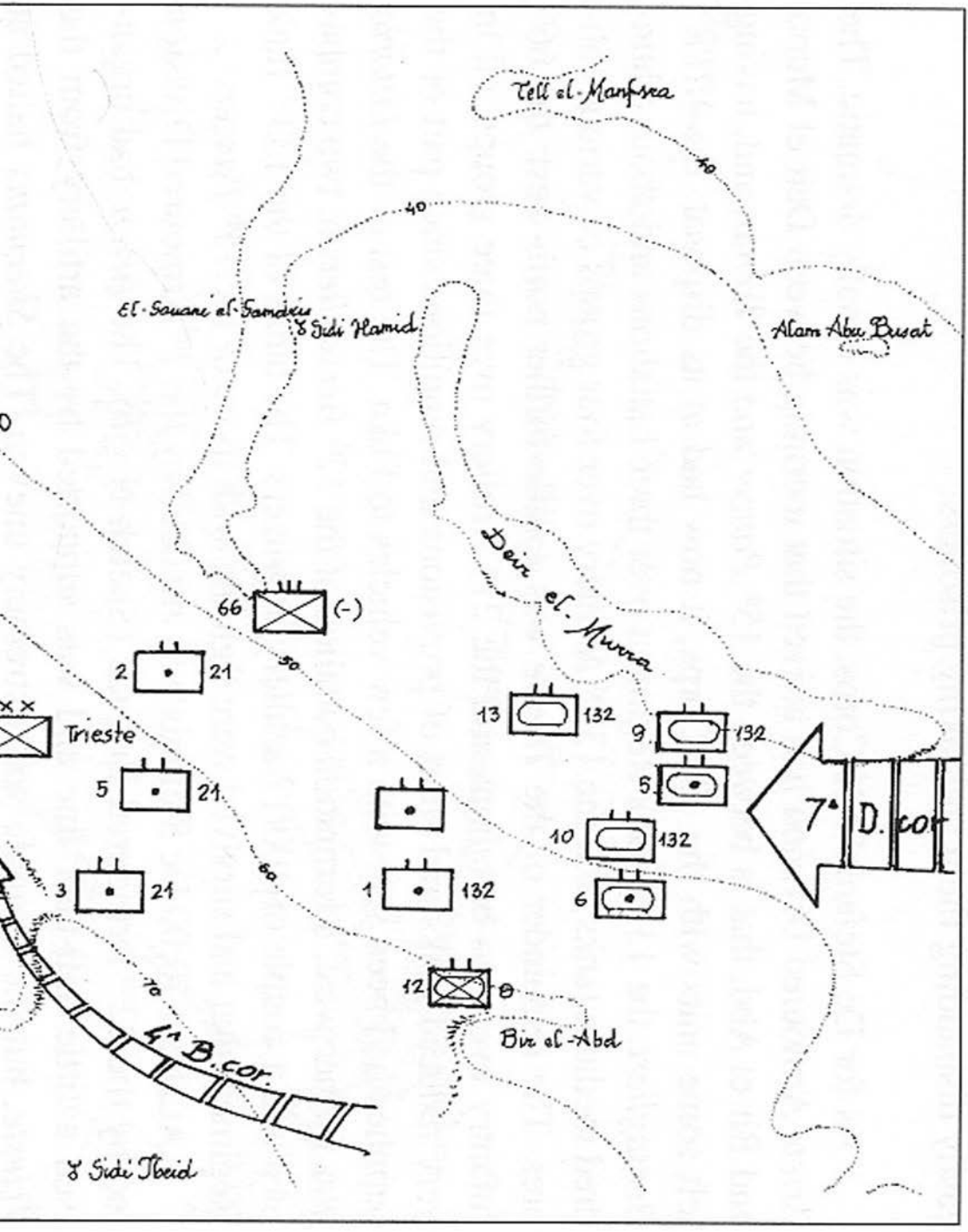
"THE END OF THE XX A



etch N. 56
RMY CORPS (4 NOVEMBER)"



were not giving up but the line had been broken through with the destruction of the *Kampfstaffel*. Even worse: General von Thoma had been captured by the British[93]. This news translated Rommel's fears into reality:

> "South-west and west of the headquarters [of the DAK]", he recalled, "one could see large dust clouds. There the desperate fight of the small and shoddy Italian tanks of the XX Corps was taking place against the approximately 200 heavy British tanks, which were surrounding the Italians on their right open flank. As was later reported by Major von Luck, whom I had sent to close the gaps between the Italians and the DAK with his units, the former, which were our strongest motorised troops, were fighting with extraordinary valour (...).
> One by one the tanks exploded or caught fire while the fierce enemy artillery fire hit the infantry positions and Italian artillery. At about 15:30, the *Ariete* sent its last radio message: "Enemy tanks have irrupted south of the *Ariete;* the *Ariete* is now surrounded. It is at about 5 kilometres north-west of Bir el Abd. *Ariete* tanks fight on". That evening the XX Italian Corps, after a valorous fight, was annihilated.
> With the *Ariete* we lost our senior Italian *camerati,* to whom, we must confess, we always asked more than they were able to do with their bad weaponry"[94].

Actually, the *Ariete* was not completely destroyed and the same was true for the *Trieste* and the *Littorio*. The division headquarters were able to withdraw part of their forces[95]. However, by 15:00, any illusion of

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[93] According to Col. Bayerlein's summary, shortly after sunrise, von Thoma greeted his Chief of Staff, who was going south of El Daba to arrange the new command post, with these words: *"Bayerlein, Hitler's order is the fruit of a sick mind. I cannot go on like this. Go to El Daba. I will stay here and will take charge of the defence of Tell el Mampsra personally"*. At 11:00 von Thoma's field advisor showed up in El Daba and said that he was relieved by the general and he did not know anything about his fate. Bayerlein immediately got on a light tank and headed to Tell el Mampsra. Once he reached the city, he noticed the tall figure of von Thoma in the distance close to a burning tank, in the middle of the devastation of the battlefield. A little while later, the general surrendered to a British captain. At that moment, about 300 German soldiers came out of foxholes in the desert or from the wreckage of destroyed tanks and surrendered too. Von Thoma was brought to Montgomery, invited to supper and informed about the last developments of the situation. When he learned that the 8th Army's armoured cars had already reached Fuka, he commented: *"If it is true, our troops are really in a very serious situation"* (DE GUINGAND, *op. cit.*, p. 209).

[94] E. ROMMEL, *op. cit.*, p. 288.

[95] The *Ariete* managed to disengage: the divisional headquarters, the 8th *Bersaglieri* with 200 men, the 132nd Tanks with 31 tanks, the 132nd Artillery with 17 pieces (of which only half were efficient). Among the 100 tanks the *Ariete* had at its disposal (about 20 M13s and 6 self-propelled had

resistance had been shattered: the DAK front had been breached in many points, the XX and the XXI Corps were being annihilated and the X had been left to its own devices. The enemy armoured divisions had total freedom of movement and the *Royal Air Force* raged on. At that point Rommel did not hesitate any longer and, without asking for any authorisation, he commanded a general retreat. It was 15:30. Perhaps, he hoped, he could still save what was left of the ACIT's armoured vehicles. That was only possible if they managed to set off on the roads immediately and flee at full speed. Those that could not make it were lost.

Hitler's approval was sent by the OKW at 20:50 and was received by ACIT the next morning: *"Given the circumstances, I approve of your decisions. The Duce has given similar instructions through the High Command"*.

The German divisions immediately began their retreat, lining up on the track. The XX Corps, which had to lead the saved troops 25 kilometres south of Kufa, reorganised its units as well as it could and moved in the night of the 5th, on a parallel road to the coastal road, at a distance of about 20-25 kilometres from it, to allow safety on the flanks of the columns moving along the road. The transports followed the coastal road instead, along with their escort, so that, once they had arrived, they could set up road blocks to gather the scattered soldiers. The XXI Corps did not have any difficulties having the new I/61st Infantry and I/39th Infantry retreat, since, as we said before, they were at the Ghazal station and at El Daba, but there was not much hope of escaping capture for the troops of the *Bologna* and the 7th *Bersaglieri*.

Finally, the X Corps. Nebbia received the order to retreat at 16:00 and by 19:00 he had issued the orders to the *Brescia*, the *Folgore* and the *Pavia*. The movement was divided into three night stages, each of about 25 kilometres; it was supposed to end up on the Fuka line by the morning of the 7th. There were two itineraries through the desert: a northern one for the *Brescia* and the army corps artillery, another one for the *Folgore*, the Army Corps Headquarters and the *Pavia*.

In such a difficult and complex situation, under constant enemy pressure, when everything had to be fast and dynamic, the tremendous vehicle deficiency took its toll on the tragic fate of the troops of the X Corps.

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been sent to the coast according to the ACIT order), 30 were destroyed by 15:30, about 30 retreated in the late afternoon with the rest of the army corps, another 40 remained immobilized on the battlefield; some of them struggled on for a while and were then eliminated one by one in the darkness; some others, once they were repaired, managed to save themselves in small groups.

Forced to move on foot, burdened by the necessity of carrying the heavy division weaponry and indispensable materials to arrive at the Fuka meridian, they were bound to become the easiest of prey and collapse in the middle of the desert from hunger, thirst and fatigue.

As we said before, *Delease* had collected, at least in theory, 150 vehicles for infantry transportation. Barbasetti was not happy to yield them, as he was probably thinking so much about problems with the Logistic Headquarters that he remarked to Mancinelli, *"it immensely cuts into the already very limited possibilities of transport for us and the Germans"*, and that, once the emergency was over, the vehicles had to be made available to carry supplies. *"Mark my words"*, Barbasetti finally said, *"once those vehicles have been lent, as always, they will not be given back"*[96]. Unfortunately, apart from the limited number that were granted on loan, the deal was, obviously to try to shorten waiting times, that the vehicles were to get to El Daba starting from the morning of 3 November, as they fulfilled their provisional duties. The General Staff, in a joint effort with ACIT, had to gather them, divide them in groups and send them to the large units. Moreover, the majority of the drivers and vehicles were civilian, bound to the Logistic Headquarters by regular contracts for normal transport, surely not for the front line. In this case, they had to drive through the desert with hardly any idea of the direction to follow to reach their destination. Then, the areas behind the front on 3 November were heavily and continuously disturbed by British air raids and series of British and South African armoured cars. The coastal road already showed signs of the retreat.

Mancinelli got down to work trying to organise small convoys. He found less than a hundred trucks at El Daba and sent them all to the X Corps, the furthest and with the heaviest distress. *"I never found out"*, he later wrote, *"if any of those precious trucks ever reached their destination; unfortunately, I have reason to believe that they were all lost or missing"*[97]. In the morning of the 5th, at the end of the first stage of retreat, once the X Corps had arrived at Qubur Shamata, 50 kilometres south of El Daba, it desperately asked for provisions: *"Troops without water, vehicles without fuel. The 150 reported vehicles not arrived"* (7:30) and a little later Nebbia

[96] *Delease* historical diary, tele 4480/Sit., 2/11/1942, 11:40 hours. Barbasetti alluded to the XX Heavy Vehicle Group, *lent* to the Germans temporarily in Autumn 1941 and never given back, though several requests were made.

[97] G. MANCINELLI, *op. cit.*, p. 201.

reported: *"Tonight I'll continue with the retreat and, if I don't get fuel supplies, I'll have to abandon tractors and trucks running on petrol"* (10:00).

In Rome events were regarded with a strange detachment. At 17:45 on that tragic 4 November, von Rintelen showed up at the High Command with the telegrams sent by Rommel and Kesselring in the late morning. Cavallero objected that a retreat was only acceptable within certain limits, beyond which "*it no longer means putting up an extreme defence and, at the same time, leads to a great loss of foot soldiers. I point out that an army that retreats is lost. The enemy has come down to 150 tanks* [!?], *while they used to have 400. Therefore their effort is decreasing*"[98]. After this, since Hitler had chosen to give Rommel a certain amount of freedom of movement, he had this dispatch written to the commander of ACIT:

> "Given that:
> a. yesterday the Supreme Command ordered to hold the positions of the army.
> b. in the successive actions such an order could not have any practical implementation and the front of the army had to withdraw considerably, losing almost all advantage of the organized positions;
> c. having acknowledged the documentation that was sent to us by the OKW through the German general at the Supreme Command;
> the Duce has decided it would be opportune to let you choose the right manoeuvre in order to take the army to the Fuka line, as per your proposal, and to allow also the non-motorized units to withdraw.
> The Duce orders the destruction of all the possible utilities left in abandoned territories, including the railway, its installations and coaches which cannot be emptied out.
> The Supreme Command continues its greatest effort to intensify the provisions, also by air. A group of fighters has already been arranged, while German air reinforcements are already moving out. Other information will be given personally by General Gandin, who will arrive there tomorrow the 5th"[99].

Cavallero seemed satisfied to show von Rintelen that "*the Supreme Command found the way to provide Marshal Rommel with directives with*

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[98] Cavallero's diary, 4/11/1942.

[99] DSCS, tele 33380/Op., 4/11/1942, 21:55 hours. The dispatch could not be transmitted to Colacit due to an interruption of the connection and was sent to *Delease* to be then forwarded. At 8:40 on the 5th it still had not been sent to Mancinelli because of the lack of a connection.

this dispatch, without any direct communication from him"[100]. Besides the annoyance provoked by such an attitude, the time for directives from Rome and Berlin had already passed. At 23:40 von Rintelen phoned Cavallero and informed him about new communications from Kesselring:

> "Front broken through at the centre. *Ariete* surrounded. Deep irruptions in three points of DAK. Commander General of DAK taken prisoner. During night, armoured troops trying to retreat toward Fuka where defence positions are relatively favourable (...). Arriving (in Rome) in early morning"[101].

The evening bulletin of ACIT was oppressive:

> "In the morning hours, the *Ariete* Armoured Division, the *Deutsches Afrika Korps* and the 90th African Light Division, including the 164th Light Division, repelled many attacks of infantry and massive armoured forces. Vice versa, in the early afternoon, after numerous actions with heavy tanks and the support of hammering artillery fire, the enemy managed to break through the German Africa Corps at three points. The elimination of such breaches was not possible, due to the lack of reserves. At the same time, the *Ariete* Armoured Division was attacked several times, both to the front and at the flanks, by about 100 tanks. Strong contingents of the division have been destroyed or, after a valorous struggle, taken prisoner.
> It is still not known, until now, where the remainder of the *Littorio* Armoured Division and the *Trieste* Motor Division is. The XXI Army Corps had already been broken through by a massive armoured force previously and had to retreat westwards with some of its formations. Subsequently, air reconnaissance has reported that the X Army Corps, strongly pressured by the enemy, was also retreating westwards.
> Due to the retreat of the X and XXI Army Corps, the destruction of the *Ariete* Armoured Division as well as the breach of the German Africa Corps, the present front cannot be held anymore. And so, in order to prevent the German Africa Corps and the 90th African Light Division from being cut out, it was necessary to order a retreat to the Fuka positions. For the moment, it is not possible to judge if they will be able to build and maintain a new front there.

[100] Cavallero's Diary, 4/11/1942.
[101] *Ibid.*

Von Thoma, the general of the armoured troops, in charge of commanding the German Africa Corps, was taken prisoner while he and his echelon were trying to prevent the penetration of the enemy forces. His echelon was destroyed at the most advanced line"[102].

The atmosphere in London was understandably euphoric. The order of winning or dying, sent by Hitler to Rommel in the late morning of the 3rd, had been decoded by *Ultra* in the early hours of the 4th but, due to security reasons, the news was not communicated to Alexander until the afternoon along with a prohibition of it being divulged. At 15:30 General Brooke was summoned by Churchill once again, who was so satisfied that he wanted to ring the bells. The Chief of Staff was barely able to convince him to wait a while longer in order to avoid any painful misunderstandings. Finally, he received the telegram from Alexander in the late afternoon:

"After ten days of harsh and violent struggle, the 8th Army has inflicted a severe defeat upon the German and Italian troops under Rommel's command. The enemy front has been broken and the British armoured divisions have passed through and are now operating behind the enemy's back. The enemy units which managed to disingage are now retreating and being constantly attacked by our armoured and motorized divisions as well as by aviation. Other enemy divisions are still drawn up and try to escape annihilation; they will probably be surrounded and isolated.

The RAF has given magnificent support to the land battle for all its duration and is now relentlessly hammering the retreating columns. The fighting continues"[103].

Churchill answered with enthusiasm that if it really was a decisive victory *"I propose ringing the bells in all of England, for the first time in this war"*. But he would still need at least 20,000 prisoners.

4. Considerations

The fierce struggle fought between 23 October and 4 November at El Alamein has passed into history as one of the decisive battles of the war.

[102] DSCS, tele 1048, 4/11/1942, 20:00 hours by ACIT, received in Rome on the following day at 5:00.
[103] W. CHURCHILL, *op. cit.*, p. 218.

According to the clamour at the time and taking into consideration the practical results achieved in the tactical and strategic fields, it can undoubtedly be considered so. Yet... if we take our eyes off the mentioned period and direct them in a correct context of the events at the end of June-beginning of July and the end of August-beginning of September, and the events which were soon to happen in French North Africa, we must consider two questions that have already been asked by scholars and critics: is the third battle of El Alamein the most important? Was this last battle really necessary?

For a moment, let's just look at the war events. Then we shall try to find the answers among the conclusions.

The planning of the battle. "*The army interrupted the offensive*", Rommel wrote in his famous report of 22 September, "*and assumed a defensive attitude on favourable positions for a future attack (...). I trust (...) we will be able to reinforce the army (...). In the meantime we will keep a defensive position*". The basic criteria for the organisation of a defence were illustrated by the field marshal himself.

The air and armoured superiority of the opponent and the chronic fuel deficit did not allow ACIT to form a defence other than the static one. It was thus necessary to support the infantry with a fortified front.

Behind El Alamein there was the sea and the impassable El Qattara Depression. The position was not very wide, therefore the defence was by all means the only card to play.

The terrain did not offer any natural features of tactical value to be used. It was therefore necessary to cover the whole line with deep minefields, also using those seized from the enemy and increasing their obstructive value with explosive devices, air bombs, artillery shells and barbed wire obstacles.

The enemy was particularly cut out for the breakthrough battle, in that the training they had received was affected by the fighting experience gained during the First World War. The static structures, therefore, had to be so solid and the front so densely garrisoned as to be able to resist violent attacks for a long time.

The enemy had a formidable superiority of men and equipment. It was thus necessary to build a very deep security area in order to cause a strain in the first echelon of the British brigades.

In such an environment the directions of the attack were hard to graduate in terms of probability and danger; the enemy would certainly be forced to launch multiple attacks. The entire front had to be defended in an even way. But the Italian units were shabby and had "*miserable*" armament. Moreover, they seemed extremely strained (the entire XXI Corps had only

12,000 soldiers, services included). And so, to take a better advantage of the German weapons, especially of the anti-tank ones, it was necessary to alternate the German and Italian battalions on the defensive position.

The ACIT artillery was also seriously inferior. Not only were the ammunition supplies limited, especially for some calibres and for the guns that were part of the war spoils, but most of the pieces were Italian or, in other words, outmoded with a range of only six-nine kilometres for the 75 and 100 calibres and ten for the 105, versus the twelve kilometres of the British 25-pounder pieces. It was therefore necessary to give the divisional artilleries, including the ones of the *Panzerdivisionen*, a more forward formation, close to the infantry strongholds, and place some batteries in the security area.

The British armoured mass could not be contained in the open field. The delay and confusion caused by minefields, the firing of the 88 pieces and the resistance of the static structures to the bitter end would not prevent the infiltrations. The enemy would try to quickly widen any possible breach, in order to obtain the desired outlet behind the resistance positions. It was therefore necessary to deploy the armoured units near the resistance position and have them eliminate the local penetrations with immediate counterattacks.

The technical insufficiency of the Italian tanks (14 tons and a 47-mm weapon) made them fall prey to the *Crusaders* (20 tons and a 57-mm weapon) and, above all, to the *Grants* and *Shermans* (about 30 tons and a 75-mm weapon). It was therefore necessary to mix the Italian and German tank battalions and build combined formations.

These were the main criteria used by Rommel, even though he himself knew it was simply a solution of compromise. Besides the fact that he had not realized the extent and the quality of the actual British superiority, the inconsistency of his plan was shown by the excessive imbalance between the air forces, which seriously limited him in the tactical field, and the logistic fetters that forced him to live more or less from day to day, without any room for the unexpected. Anyway, he admitted this inconsistency:

> "A compromise is not the ideal solution. We were simply doing our best, with our lean resources, to cope with the deficiencies that tormented us"[104].

That is what Rommel wrote then. Moreover, in the report of 22 September he stated to the commanders of the large units: "*The formation,*

[104] B. LIDDELL HART, *The Rommel Papers, cit.* p. 133.

to be modified within a few weeks, will allow us to no longer fear even a colossal attack". The optimism he demonstrated was probably circumstantial or perhaps it was based on the wished-for substantial reinforcements. However, it is possible that "*in the course of his swinging moods, he fell for that moment into the drumming of optimism*", Mancinelli revealed. However, it must be remembered that Stumme, responding to Cavallero's congratulations on 3 October for the post he had obtained, completely shared Rommel's point of view about the army, and showed absolute optimism about the British attack, given the existence of premises to efficiently sustain a frontal attack. Moreover, he considered the passage from the victorious defence to a counter-offensive reaction toward Alexandria possible, keeping in mind the absolute necessity of provisions, reserves and reinforcements.

Were the measures decided and ordered by Rommel, and accepted and carried out by Stumme, appropriate? Rommel expressed his opinion as follows:

> "Actually, all our efforts were useless against the immense superiority of the British forces, not because we had made mistakes but because victory was simply impossible in the conditions in which we were forced to face the battle"[105].

There were two criticisms made of the ACIT dispositions. The first one is related to the formation of the mass artillery too close to the strongholds of the resistance positions, thus artillery units found themselves in a negative situation when the strongholds were submitted to the power of the attack. It is now impossible to deny that a more backward formation would have limited the number of losses caused by the action of British batteries, but not the ones caused by the air strikes. In any case, given the limited range, there could only have been some satisfactory results if the artilleries had been moved forward, as the only way to halt the attacking infantry of the enemy was by using the counter-battery or at least the barrage.

The second point is related to the direction the reserves were used in: local counterattacks where some leak took place with a renunciation of more serious interventions. The observation is convincing but, as in the case of the artillery, it does not seem to respect reality. The army corps was lacking in reserves and ACIT did not have enough armoured forces to allow two different reserve categories: sector reserve and army reserve.

[105] *Ibid.*, p. 300.

Thus, it is understandable that Rommel felt forced to choose the local intervention, in order to avoid the consolidation of possible enemy bridgeheads beyond the resistance positions. If he had let the armoured British flood flow into the open space, he would have been swept away. Nevertheless, the studies and manoeuvres with the commanding staff carried out in October were designed for the coordinated and pre-organised intervention of every couple of divisions - the *Littorio* and the 15th *Panzer* to the north, the *Ariete* and the 21st *Panzer* to the south following a breach of the front, therefore dealing with counterattacks on an extended scale.

Moreover, on 19 October, Bitossi and von Vaerst received the order to prepare a short study on a pre-emptive counterattack east of the defensive position. Stumme had evidently thought that, in the case of a British offensive, it would not be difficult to pinpoint the enemy columns and surprise them while they were moving in no man's land. Bitossi transmitted his study to the XX Corps Headquarters a couple of days later. It seemed that he did not consider such an action either useful or feasible in front of the line for a series of reasons. Instead, he proposed moving the tanks and the services about ten kilometres further west, in order to have more space for a massive counterattack.

Fuller made some observations about the Italo-German preparation of the defensive battle. Once the resistance in place had been established, Rommel should have used the tactics of 1918, with some adaptations: when the attack is imminent, withdraw most of the army. In practice, the DAK and the XX Corps should have moved back about 30 to 150 kilometres (*sic*) - and not 3 to 15 kilometres, as it happened during the First World War, because the penetration of tanks is ten times faster than an infantry attack - and then counterattack violently. Since it took 12 days for the 8th Army to open a passage through the minefields, Rommel had as many days to retreat: he could have done it at his convenience. He then added:

> "If he was not able to manoeuvre in front or on the flanks of the defensive positions, the only match to play was to prepare the manoeuvre to the rear. The direction he chose did not have great importance because he would have turned the battle of movement in his favour anyway"[106].

As flat as the English critic was in his final judgement: "*I, therefore, believe that Rommel's defensive tactics were a great mistake*", there are many objections to his opinion. As he was practically writing in the peri-

[106] J.F.C. FULLER, *La guerre mécanique*, Paris, 1948, pp. 278-279.

od in which the events were taking place, it was impossible for him to know about Rommel's absence or about the significant deficiencies of ACIT. On the other hand, Rommel himself declared that he had done his best but not what he would have liked to do.

In essence, keeping in mind the operational atmosphere, the information about the enemy possessed by ACIT and the justifiably hoped-for reinforcements, as well as the proximity of the desired objective of the Canal, frankly speaking, it is not easy to identify measures fundamentally different from those adopted. The same recourse to the intermingling of the Axis units, devised after the crisis of July and openly recognized as a temporary expedient, could appear acceptable on paper, though unpleasant.

For Montgomery, it dealt with individuating the most advantageous tactical approach. The characteristics of the natural environment suggested more or less that an attack to the north or to the south would be the same. In fact, Montgomery, as early as September, had fondled the idea of taking advantage of both directions with a gravitation of the effort in the northern sector. The target to reach: create a corridor in the defensive position of ACIT and have the X Corps pass through to sweep away the *Panzers*. But then, thinking it over, he changed his mind as he believed he would not be able to launch a double attack, or rather to guarantee the southern attack the right solidity to provoke the intervention of half the Italo-German armoured reserves in that sector. The secondary effort was not supposed to have a binding, but rather a threatening character and, at the same time, it could be exploited to the extreme consequences if no tenacious resistance were encountered. Quite a complex concept related to the dosage of forces.

The military concept at that time aimed at the destruction of the armoured divisions as the main objective of the battle. The infantry would be defeated in a second phase, without struggle, if not defeated on their own. As it was necessary to think that Rommel too shared such a conviction "*I decided to reverse the concept and destroy the non-armoured divisions first,* said Montgomery, *"in so doing I would then keep the armoured divisions at a distance to be faced later on"*[107]. Thus it was necessary to first aim at the methodical destruction of the infantries at the resistance position (quite a suitable thing considering the training of the British troops), and in the meantime keeping the Axis armoured formations

[107] B. MONTGOMERY, *Da El Alamein, cit.*, p. 19. According to the enemy: *"The number of German cars had always been an issue of major importance. The question of Italian tanks could at least be interesting, but hardly had any influence on the plans"* (H. KIPPENBERGER, *op. cit.* p. 205).

unable to prevent the *"demolition"* of the static structures. Then it would be the *Panzerdivisionen*'s turn.

The enemy was famous for his particular response skills. It was then necessary to maintain, on the one hand, constant pressure all over the front and, on the other, take advantage of every weakness and every favourable circumstance, both north and south.

The main effort would be launched in the northern sector, which seemed to offer greater possibilities for a decisive result. Therefore, it was necessary to put a meticulous deception plan into action, which would make the opponent fear the strongest blow to the south: *"The essential elements of the battle"*, specified Montgomery, *"would be: to maintain the initiative, the maintenance of pressure on the enemy and the balance of forces, so it would not be necessary to react to the enemy thrusts"*[108].

Moreover, Montgomery declared he was searching for something new that *"would be far away from the traditional tactics of the desert"*, that is to say, from the external envelopment of the southern wing. But here, he would not be able to operate externally, because the El Qattara Depression prevented him from doing so. He had to break through. And he could do it since he did not have any problems with soldiers, or artillery, means of transportation, ammunition or fuel. There was probably just one limit: time. But it was a prestige limit. The imminence of Operation *Torch* was well known.

Far from making observations about a plan of attack that was so *old style* and systematic: during the war one does what is most useful to achieve success. Far from wrinkling one's nose at the almost complete knowledge of the cards Rommel was holding: during war the advantage acquired in the field of intelligence is quite often the source of victory. Far from criticizing the overwhelming superiority of the forces and equipment: in war, more power leads to fewer losses and quicker victories, at least usually. More than recognizing an ingenious plan, it could be legitimate to draw a historical comparison. Montgomery, indeed, proposed sweeping Rommel away *selon les règles de la mécanique et les lois de la gravitation*: the concept of war of the allies against Napoleon in 1815.

The conduct of the battle. *"He who knows the decisive importance of the first dispositions at the beginning of a defensive battle"*, commented Kesselring, *"can judge what damage the lack of the Commander in Chief*

[108] *Ibid.*, pp. 21-22.

caused to the entire course of the operation"[109]. When we talk about the predispositions assumed by Rommel, we must not forget two things. First of all, he did not think that the hurricane would strike during his absence. Secondly, he felt able to modify the initial plan successfully, during the battle, if he saw excessive difficulty in facing or overcoming a determined obstacle, or the possibility of taking advantage of the enemy's mistake.

Once it was known that Stumme was missing, Rommel feared the worst and the first information received from von Rintelen in Rome confirmed the sad situation. Once he took command back, he harshly criticized his substitute, perhaps wrongly, for not having allowed the artillery a timely counter-preparation, with the excuse of saving ammunition. Nevertheless, such an order was never found in any documents. Stumme, very simply, had prescribed an attentive discipline of firing for some time, as it was common knowledge that the level of provisions was extremely low within the army[110]. So, it was a different story. It is much more plausible that the real reasons for an insufficient counter-preparation were: the almost immediate interruption of transmissions, the difficulty of orientation in front of the enemy fire opened on the entire front; the well-known technical limits regarding the counter-battery and the scarce possibilities of an efficient close interdiction, the difficulties the observing officers in a forward position ran into and, perhaps, the imprecision of the firing requests. There were an estimated 426 field pieces and Leese's 48 heavy field pieces versus 232 field and 64 heavy field pieces of the Axis, with this comment:

> "Only 80 guns (of the Axis) could be reached by medium artilleries which, in turns, concentrated a rate of fire of 96 rounds per gun in two minutes on the enemy battery. There were 1,800 shells fired before the zero hour. The enemy response was weak and, according to the British artillerymen, the volume of fire did not become considerable until about 4:00 the next morning. Some infantry units do not agree with this version"[111].

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[109] KESSELRING A., *op. cit.*, p. 136. According to some opinions, the forced return of Rommel confirmed the fact that he - as directly responsible for the precarious strategic situation of ACIT - had left to avoid the risk of a serious personal failure on the same positions where his previous success had been hailed as an overwhelming victory. Frankly, we do not share in such an appraisal.

[110] On 26 October General Palma, from the Logistic Headquarters of North Africa, wrote to the head of delegation no. 3, Lieut. Col. Soldani: *"I am really worried that if on the first day of the battle, which will certainly be long, I am asked to send ammunition - considering that the 1.5 unfoc on the front is not enough - I will be forced to conclude that within two or three days we will not have ammunition anymore"* (Logistic Headquarters Delegation Historical Diary, no. 3, 27/10/1942).

[111] M. CARVER, *op. cit.*, p. 171.

In other words, only the 24 heavy pieces of the ACIT had been able to hit the batteries of the 30th Corps since the beginning. The batteries, therefore, felt a *"significant"* response only after the formation had been moved forward.

To the south, where the intensity of the offensive was less massive, the directions of the attack were quickly identified and the stretches hit in the defensive position were much narrower. The artillery response of the X Corps was faster. On this subject, General Arena observed that the firing plan of the *Ariete* and the X Army Corps foresaw a main firing sector and many secondary firing sectors for each artillery unit, according to the Italian doctrine. In this way, it was much easier to bring, if necessary, the artillery groups to intervene in every part of the front. *"Notwithstanding long and reiterated discussions with German artillerymen"*, Arena wrote in his report, *"it was not possible to implement this concept, elementary to us, among the artilleries of the 21st* Panzer, *which were prepared to act according to the sector they belonged to, and were considered to be an inalienable part of it"*.

Rommel's confidence in facing up to events with spontaneous decisions has already been mentioned. He was informed of the course of battle by Westphal, then turned his attention towards the Kidney area, and in the morning of the 26th wanted to witness the counterattack launched by the units of the 15th *Panzer* and the *Littorio*. He was alarmed by what he saw: the action went on slowly while the British infantry desperately defended itself and kept possession of the positions. The intervention of the Italo-German artillery, that was intended to prevent the flow of reinforcements, was unsatisfactory due to the lack of ammunition, while the firing of the British batteries was intense. The only incursion of Axis *Stukas*, in the late afternoon, ended in a disastrous confrontation with the enemy fighters and anti-aircraft artillery. In the meantime, the *Royal Air Force* bomber formations kept hammering the ACIT troops.

Rommel certainly realized he could not just wait for every enemy move to respond. He would find himself involved in a series of parries without managing to conquer the initiative: a suicide. When he learned that the 15th *Panzer* had lost 60 tanks and the *Littorio* more or less the same number, he probably felt incapable of resisting Montgomery's intention of wearing him down with successive local provocations.

An aspect, the only one, of the offensive that brought him some hope was that the enemy *"was quite hesitant and operated with maximum prudence"*. This would allow him to gather a large armoured mass to the north and step back a few kilometres to create space and then annihilate the

British penetration with the typical violence and skill of the *Panzerdivisionen*, taking advantage of the limitations that an armoured combat would impose on the RAF and the British artillery. Nevertheless, moving the armoured units from the southern to the northern sector would turn out to be dangerous and, on the other hand, employing all four armoured divisions in a major battle was impossible due to the lack of fuel. It was not possible to do more than the usual compromise. Therefore, the 90th Light was immediately thrown into the battle, the *Trieste* got close and the 21st *Panzer* was brought north with a group from the *Ariete*. It is too difficult to judge this point with hindsight. Rommel was not sure of having adequate supplies for a clash of such proportions and yet there were no doubts about the enemy's intention to aim at a battle of attrition against ACIT. Therefore, it is not fair to criticize him for not having resolved to play all his cards on the third day of the battle. Also because there was another more serious decision that he was going to have to make.

In many ways the 29th of October was a dramatic day. While Montgomery was dealing with the protests coming from London and the doubts that were surrounding him, Rommel found himself alone confronted with the worse of choices. Considering the way things were going, the 8th Army would break through the front sooner or later. To sit and wait would be crazy. On the other hand, under those conditions, a retreat was an uncertainty. It was necessary for Rommel to get his breath back, break contact, have the infantry retreat in trucks, protect the retreat with the armoured divisions, and recover them in the end. Each of these phases constituted a problem and for each problem there was a question: would they make it?

From that moment on, or rather, from the evening of the 30th on, after personally making reconnaissance on the Fuka position, Rommel waited for a suitable occasion to order the disengagement. Let's quickly review the successive steps:

30 October: Mancinelli's telegram to Rome with the "hypothesis" of a retreat on Fuka (morning);
2 November: beginning of *Supercharge* (about 1:00);
approximate orders for the retreat, not expected before the 5th (late morning);
warning order for the disengagement (16:00);
order to break contact and retreat to meridian 850 (19:30);
ACIT evening bulletin (22:30);
3 November: arrival of Hitler's and Mussolini's orders (13:00);

counter-orders for the divisions (15:00);
4 November: Meeting between Rommel and Kesserling (8:30);
new request for authorisation to retreat for the OKW;
British breach at Tell el Aqqaqir;
Rommel's decision to retreat (15:30);
5 November: arrival of authorisation from Hitler and Mussolini (morning).

Rommel admitted only one mistake: if he had disregarded Hitler's order to fight or die 24 hours earlier, he would have saved most of the army, infantry included. It may seem nuanced, but it could be maintained that the mistake occurred in sending the evening bulletin on 2 November. The report itself needed to affirm a strong and convinced intention of proceeding with the retreat, despite Hitler's more than probable refusal. Rommel, instead, tried to be convincing at first, but he then felt like ignoring such a harsh command. After all, he knew very well how commanders were treated in such situations. The events of General Hoepner, demoted and dismissed with dishonour from the army, served as a lesson.

One could argue about a better moment to break contact, but, to avoid useless disquisition, it should be supported by the only cards Rommel had at his disposal in those days. In a question like this, in which Rommel's character as the commander in chief stands out, it must be recognized that he had suffered from exceptional nervous tension for about two years. With or without good reason, he felt he was facing an enemy that was much stronger than him. *"More than physical, he was in a serious nervous state"*, remembered General von Thoma, *"and, therefore, his moods and opinions were changing constantly"*[112].

This said, Kesselring's immediate and resolute stance, once he had learned the exact operational situation, should be underlined. A very remarkable attitude, considering that he was supposed to support the idea of defence by all means. It is truly one thing to express an opinion and another to decide by oneself. Kesselring managed to show his own independent ideas later on as well.

Let's now go on to the role of the Supreme Command. It is unpleasant to say, but it was not praiseworthy at all. The fact that it tried to do miracles is beyond discussion, yet no concrete measures were taken to improve the conditions of ACIT and give it the trim adequate for the circumstances. What emerges from the picture of the relationships between the corps and division commanders is both distressful and mortifying. The

[112] B. LIDDELL HART, *Storia di una sconfitta*, *cit.*, p. 282.

enchanting "reinforcement" turned out to be a mere euphemism. Only an already efficient unit can be reinforced to achieve certain results. On the contrary, the Italian divisions were worn out and below the efficiency level, due to the lack of almost everything. Just to give an example, the *Pavia* had about 70-80 soldiers in its rifle companies, the 27th Infantry had *seven* trucks available and the 28th had *four*. Notwithstanding the enormous efforts, it is essential to recognize that not even one of the harrowing difficulties tormenting the divisions had ever been resolved: officers, other personnel, signal equipment, motorisation, logistic autonomy, supplies or evacuations.

We learn from Cavallero's diary that he serenely accepted the announcement of Montgomery's offensive with confidence, although he knew that the X and the XXI Army Corps did not have a commander and he did not fall apart when he learned of Stumme's death right at the beginning of the battle. Furthermore, the information from Egypt made him quickly understand that the expected threat was much more serious than it had been initially believed. It, therefore, seems unexplainable why Rommel's invitation to discuss *"the serious situation"* had been refused. Barbasetti, whose headquarters was located in Ain el Gazala, that it to say, about 600 kilometres from the front, could not make any decision about the line of conduct or supply any significant help. Rommel's desire, or rather his need, for a high level interlocutor, who could support some of his proposals directed to the OKW, was explicit. Mancinelli, who personally experienced the situation, was enough to listen and report.

Possibly, the most perplexing thing is the stance that Cavallero assumed during the crisis. On 2 November, when they found out that there had been fierce tank fightings in the area of Tell el Aqqaqir, he showed complete trust despite the hesitation expressed by Kesselring. In the morning of the 3rd, having received the evening bulletin from the 2nd and evidently little disposed to leave the leadership of the battle to Rommel, he communicated that Mussolini considered *"it necessary to maintain the present front by all means"*, considering there were no better back positions beyond the frontier.

Indeed, in the morning of the 4th, at 9:30, he answered Mussolini on the phone:

> "(...) Yes, Duce, it seems to us too that the attack is being prepared. The enemy forces appear to be superior, but worn down too. Where the tanks are concerned, our *Ariete* should be in good condition, despite what Rommel says. The 20 tanks and self-propelled have arrived. You cannot

> trust Rommel's telegrams much, as they are skewed to support his argument (...). The fuel crisis is over, so much so that, in order to avoid congesting the port (of Bengasi), we are not sending anything more until the 12th"[113].

Whatever Cavallero's opinion of Rommel was, it is a fact that from the moment he ordered the resistance in place - though with a strange formula: "the *Duce thinks...*" - a sense of consistency and prestige led him to make the Supreme Command have the exclusive right to change or modify the order. As for the conversation he had with von Rintelen at 13:10 of the 4th, we can read in the diary: "*I affirm that he (*Rommel*) may have a certain freedom of manoeuvre, but always according to the directions of the Führer*". Moreover, such directions did not allow any alternative. A few hours later (17:45), during another conversation with von Rintelen about the "*Führer's decision to leave a certain freedom of manoeuvre to Rommel*", that is to say about allowing him to retreat to Fuka, Cavallero pointed out that "*it can only occur within certain limits. A strong retreat does not mean defence by all means anymore and causes the loss of the foot infantry divisions in the meantime*". It is not at all clear what he meant by saying "*within certain limits*". As compensation, this page of the diary translates the thoughts of Cavallero in the following terms: if the army retreats to Fuka or elsewhere, it would be doomed because it would immediately lose the infantry divisions and gradually the armoured ones as well; it is therefore better to resist at El Alamein since it is possible that the enemy would soon throw in the towel (*"their efforts are decreasing!"*). This opinion also reflected that of Hitler. Anyway, right or wrong, why not insist on it and on the order that was issued? Why telegraph Rommel and say that "*the Duce is aware of the usefulness of granting the freedom of manoeuvre in order to bring the army toward the Fuka position step by step?*" The reason was obvious and melancholic. Apart from the Supreme Command's decision, Hitler had *decided* to accept Rommel's further desperate appeal. But who was commanding?

Let's look at the position of the main characters facing the dilemma of whether to leave ACIT at El Alamein or not, naturally considering the eventuality that it may be swept away there and therefore disappear from the African theatre of operations.

Hitler was initially willing to accept the end of ACIT. It was his way of doing things and he would apply the same tactics to the Paulus army in Stalingrad. For the rest, he did not care much about Africa. After all, he had only sent the DAK there to help Italy.

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[113] Cavallero's Diary, 4/11/1942.

Kesselring had a broad view of the war in the Mediterranean and, whenever he had to face new or unknown aspects of the operational problem, he never hesitated to change his opinion or admit his own mistakes of judgement. He was fully aware of the general importance of ACIT: the battle of El Alamein could be lost, the army could not.

Rommel experienced the drama of his troops passionately. He realized that it was impossible to hold the positions, even though he had guaranteed their solidity on certain conditions. Against an overwhelming enemy attack and without supplies, the only thing he could do was to define the maximum length of a static defence in order to avoid annihilation. Forced to fight to the death, he would have lost the army, though it would not have been his fault. Imprisonment or death would have excluded any further discourse. He rebelled, even though *in extremis*. Even to him, defeat was preferable to the total annihilation of the army.

Cavallero looked at the events from a very particular point of view. When Barbasetti had asked him about the directives issued by the Supreme Command, he answered hastily at first: *"The battle is led by Marshal Rommel"*, but then he explained better, specifying that the possible retreat should only be executed by the Commander in Chief of ACIT. He concentrated on the resistance *in loco* anyway and it seems that the optimism he had while evaluating the ability to overcome the tremendous defensive test made him lose sight of the eventuality of a ruinous defeat. In other words, it seems he did not ask himself: if ACIT is destroyed at El Alamein, what will we use to stop the 8th British Army in Libya? Barbasetti's units were not even enough to stop Montgomery's vanguards, and Bastico's ones had already had difficulties facing the Tunisian hypothesis. In conclusion, while all of Rommel's problems and responsibilities would come to an end in the sands of El Alamein, Cavallero would find himself in a tragic situation, with unimaginable consequences. In the light of this *possible* event, should he not have talked about it to Rommel as soon as he received Barbasetti's report on 30 October? Certainly a retreat, carried out under any circumstances, would have led to the partial or total sacrifice of the infantry. But saving something is much better than losing everything.

In the dilemma of the painful implications, the most natural and convenient way out seems to be the one indicated by General Scattaglia, commander of the *Pavia*, in his report:

> "Motorize and retreat the most important forces, leaving the other ones in place with the task of defence to the bitter end. The first, most fortunate ones, would continue the glorious traditions of their respective

units, the others would sacrifice themselves, without remorse, making the enemy pay a high price if they attacked".

Scattaglia knew that it was one of his divisions to have the bloody honour of falling defending the position.

Montgomery had always asserted that the battle had been carried out exactly as planned, which could be true considering he had never done anything by chance, and he believed it was necessary to stay far away from any improvisation, even if suggested by favourable and unexpected circumstances. Aside from this, the statement is not convincing at all. There are some criticisms of the commander of the 8th Army: the mediocre result of Operation *Lightfoot* in the attack of the 30th and 10th Corps; the carrying out of the local actions to the detriment of the concentration of all of the energy in a determined stretch, the excessive prudence and bad harmonisation of the efforts, especially in the final phase.

We have already seen how the offensive became unstable after only a couple of days, notwithstanding the upheaval caused in the northern Italo-German sector. According to Montgomery, this was due to a lack of determination on the part of some commanders of the armoured units, but one cannot deny there is certain validity in Lumsden and Freyberg's opinions: the infantry of the 30th Corps did not accomplish its task and the premature introduction of the 20th Corps into the struggle led to a chaotic overcrowding in a narrow space that was full of passive obstacles. Undoubtedly, the close cooperation planned at the table did not come to be. Instead, two army corps (one infantry and one tank) found themselves struggling separately on the same territory.

In that difficult moment, Leese recognized the weight of Montgomery's resoluteness and... justified it like this:

> "He was always calm. Nothing disturbed him. It never entered his mind that somebody else could win. If things went badly for us, we would always have new supplies to bring in. We were always in balance"[114].

As for the local attacks of one division at a time, it is true that they were causing some dispersion, but it is also fair to recognize that they brought great results. Each of them put Rommel on alert, forced him to move the formations and accept fierce fighting. In short, they wore down ACIT.

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[114] C. BARNETT, *op. cit.*, p. 282.

Considering the systematic points of the offensive program, brand new in comparison with the previous desert operations, Leese's comment seems well placed: "*We always had the feeling that there was time to spare. We only entered the battle if we had it all*". And yet, notwithstanding its mass, the British steam-roller never managed to break the rest of the DAK and the *Littorio* in Tell el Aqqaqir. It is probable that the breach created on the 4th might have happened before if the armoured mass had attacked Deir el Murra. In the opinion of one of the non-benevolent critics, the continuous reorganisation of the 10th Army Corps, Lumsden's *corps de chasse*, which constituted Montgomery's cause of pride, and the organic disorder that occurred on 2 November in the 10th and the 30th Corps, are "*the real proof of how much the battle went wrongly, that the main plan failed completely and that Montgomery was really lucky to have such immense resources at his disposal, which allowed him to escape the fate of Cunningham and Ritchie*"[115].

Even in the final phase, that is to say on the 3rd and 4th, when ACIT had already been exhausted and reduced to only few efficient tanks, Montgomery did not abandon his attitude of an absolute carelessness toward the audacious actions.

On 3 November, the central sector of the front was already empty. What remained of the *Trieste*, the 164th Infantry Division, the *Trento* and the *Bologna* had retreated and any uncontrolled irruption of the British mechanised units in that immense empty space would have caused a collapse, or almost. Further south, in the afternoon, the artillery fire of the 13th Corps fell on the positions left by the X Italian Corps. The order given that night to Lumsden to head for the Ghazal station after coming out into the open also raises a lot of uncertainty. The usefulness of such a restricted manoeuvre was never understood, just like the imbalance between the armoured mass that had been employed and the extent of the prey to capture, i.e. the 90th Light and some Italian units.

In the end, without analysing the orders issued later regarding the exploitation of success, one must notice that in the morning of the 4th there had been a great opportunity to suddenly capture most of ACIT, but instead it was left to disappear.

The orders for the retreat. Until now we have shared in Rommel's thoughts and decisions for the most part. Now the question changes, at

[115] *Ibid.*, p. 408.

[116] B. MONTGOMERY, *Memoirs, cit.* p. 137.

least partially. The field marshal was accused of abandoning the Italian infantry in the desert. In order to justify him we must say that, when he decided not to follow Hitler's and Mussolini's orders, and consequently issued the order to retreat to Fuka, there was not any practicable possibility left. The fate of the foot infantry (including the *Ramcke* Brigade) was decided. As for Montgomery's statement, "*The Italian divisions to the south, in front of the 13th Corps, could only give up; they could not run away because the Germans took all their means of transportation*", though shared by others, is contrary to the truth and no Italian commander has ever confirmed it. The best denial may be that provided by Bastico. Although he admitted that he did not have much information about the events at his disposal, he wrote down: "*We (...) really cannot share such a malicious and rash judgement*"[117].

There were certainly many cases, isolated or otherwise, of real robbery. But those who saw Italian vehicles in the hands of the Germans should also keep in mind that there had already been an Italian vehicle group reinforcing the ally for a long time (and it would have been naive to ask for it in exactly those circumstances) and, above all, many vehicles abandoned in the desert had been repaired by the German workshops and this way they became German property, independently of their origin.

This said, let's go on to the fundamental issue. During the night of 28 October the ACIT Headquarters moved west of El Daba. It was the first sign of doubt. On 2 November, at 19:30, orders were issued to break contact and retreat the DAK, the XX and the XXI Corps to the Sidi Abd el Rahman Track and the X Corps to the positions held at the end of August. There were also directions for how to retreat to Fuka. The delegation of the Italian Logistic Headquarters had simply been ignored.

In the late morning on the 3rd, Rommel decided to take advantage of the British temporary inactivity and to move immediately toward Fuka. We know the priority order: first the northern sector (almost all German), then the central one (almost all Italian) under the protection of the armoured divisions. "*The* Ramcke *Brigade and the X Army Corps will stay on their positions (of the end of August) for the moment*" advised the phonogram. The order seems significant, besides the fact that, later on, Hitler's injunction to stop everything arrived. Even if the German units, the XX and the XXI Corps made it in time, it could not be expected that the troops detached to the south would make it. They were already mentally doomed.

[117] General Bastico's report from the spring of 1943.

Let's be clear, by giving priority to the infantry, there would be a real risk that its enormous slowness would compromise the whole army. This means that the decision had been caused by sad necessity. Moreover, Bastico himself did not hesitate: *"If, before retreating, the army had waited to be reached by the X Army Corps, it would certainly have been completely destroyed. Its headquarters would thus have made a serious mistake"*.

The clear contradiction between the order mentioned and what we can read in Rommel's papers in not acceptable: *"The 90th Light, the DAK and the XX Italian Corps had to retreat slowly enough to allow for the march and the transport of the non-motorized divisions"*[118]. Very vague and too inexact, at least.

The Italian troops of ACIT were supplied by the Delegation of the Logistic Headquarters no. 3 (Lieut. Col. Soldani), employed by the North African Logistic Headquarters (General Palma) which was based in Tobruk. Most of the delegation services were detached in Matruh, together with a major hospital centre (480 beds) and a subsidiary one (370 beds) There had been a logistic centre built in El Daba, together with an advanced health centre (300 beds). There had been an *Oberquartiermeister* (Major Otto) arranged as combat service support for the German troops, equipped with its own service departments. The relations between the two logistic managers were excellent.

That morning, while the troops were completing the movements they had started during the night and were carrying out the movements of the army corps and divisional bases westwards, Lieut. Col. Soldani learned about Rommel's order regarding the retreat to Fuka at first and subsequently to the east of Matruh from Mancinelli. Consequently, he immediately ordered the logistic centre in El Daba to send the field hospitals, an apportion of subsistence departments and various services directly to Tobruk and then to retreat with its bulk toward Matruh.

At about 18:00 Mancinelli issued the counter-order and Soldani modified the initial measure, that is to say he left the logistic centre in place, but much lighter and equipped according to the consumption[119]. Later on, at 22:00, Major Otto reached Matruh and confirmed the news, though he seemed quite optimistic.

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[118] E. ROMMEL, *op. cit.*, p. 280.

[119] The heavy materials not ready to use were sent to Matruh and to the health centre west of Fuka, where the bases of the large units had already been transferred.

In the morning of the 4th Soldani returned to El Daba, meeting, as it was related by General Palma, with *"an uninterrupted column of German vehicles (mixed, now and then, with some Italian ones) saving tables, carpets, washbowls, etc"*. He spoke to Mancinelli and, considering that the situation was unchanged, went back to Matruh. At the same time, Rommel noticed that *"there was a serious traffic jam, especially of Italian vehicles"*, on the coastal road, but his memories are quite confused. In fact, he continued: *"Our vehicles were flowing westwards in thick columns. The Italian infantry was on foot and the road was extremely crowded"*, which is surprising because the Italian units on foot were far from the coastal road.

At 15:30, as we know, the ACIT Headquarters issued an order for the general retreat. *"Retreat to the new formation area south of Fuka"*[120]. Evidently, it referred to and was following the prescriptions from the 2nd, however the circumstances had changed notably. Without too much exaggeration, it may be compared to: "Everyman for himself!"

The picture of disorientation, especially for the Italians, would not be complete if it were not accompanied by a very significant clarification. The intermingling of the units, conceived and carried out with the best intentions in the world, had not created any particularly difficult situations during the battle, thanks to the extreme good will of the Italian commanders at all levels. For instance, the 164th Infantry Division and the *Ramcke* Brigade, depending on the XXI and X Corps respectively, used to receive the orders directly from the ACIT Headquarters, and the Italian commanders were not even informed.

And so, from time to time, the German units, which appeared in the Italian sector, fought for a while and then disappeared suddenly, obviously due to some higher order, without a thought to directing any sector command or even the adjacent units. The Italian divisions and corps learned about what was happening on the German field only generally and when the operation was already concluded. Consequently, sometimes news about the Italian units got lost, or there were rumours about local losses due (obviously) to the deficiency of the Italian resistance. It is true that sometimes formal apologies by the German commanders followed, but the fact itself was quite annoying[121].

[120] It deals with the order sent to the XXI Corps. The one transmitted to the X and XX Corps is not known, but there is reason to believe it was the same.

[121] Just to give an example, at about 1:00 on 29 October, during the Australian attack on the coast, the commander of the 115th *Panzergrenadiere* informed the commander of the 133rd *Tank Battalion* that the XXIII/12th *Bersaglieri* Battalion, positioned in the northern sector assigned to the 15th *Panzer*, had

However, this behaviour of the ally was considered with philosophy and it did not influence the course of the battle. The moment of truth occurred at the time of retreat. All the Italian formations on German tactical dependence were abandoned where they were with no advance notice or a word of orientation. The seriousness of such behaviour lies especially in the fact that the involved formations were reliant on the German signal system, directly or through the liaison officers. The disappearance of the German headquarters thus caused a destructive confusion[122].

In the late evening of the 4th the Italian liaison officer at *Oberquartiermeister* phoned the delegation of the Logistic Headquarters and informed them that the situation had once again got out of control and the German Army and Logistic Headquarters were retreating. Lieut. Col. Soldani immediately gathered about twenty trucks, all those available, and sent them to the logistic centre in El Daba with the order to save what could be saved. None of them reached the destination. In compensation, at 9:45 of the next morning Soldani received a note written at 5:00 by the chief of the logistic centre from a *Carabiniere* motorcyclist: *"The news we are receiving is more than catastrophic, especially from the Germans, who have abandoned everything and are running westwards (...)"*[123].

General Barbasetti expressed his opinion about the army headquarters rather harshly:

> "It does not seem that the ACIT Headquarters made it in time to assure the retreat of the X Army Corps, nor was the X Corps given - even *in*

surrendered and that its positions had been re-conquered by the German companies. At 2:30, General Bitossi, was delivered the following message by the liaison officer of the 15th *Panzer*: "*XXIII* Bersaglieri *Battalion withdrew. The commander of the division should personally make the battalion return and take their positions as they are a neuralgic point of the battle (order of the army)*". It is easy to imagine Bitossi's feelings for the form and the fact. After a short enquiry he found out the *Bersaglieri* had not withdrawn at all, as they were not engaged except for some harassing fire that came from some British batteries. At 4:15, General von Vaerst apologized personally to Bitossi. The news was given by mistake by the 90th Light whose liaison team could not find the XXIII *Bersaglieri* Battalion due to a mistake in direction!

[122] An example for this issue. At about 1:00 on 5 November the commander of the IV Libyan Battalion, detached to Qattara Spring, in the area of Matruh, phoned the delegation of the Logistic Headquarters to have some news. He was surprised by the long silence of the 288th *Panzergrenadiere* (*Menton* Group) which he depended on. After many attempts, he found out that the Germans had dislodged from Matruh many hours before.

[123] The Logistic Headquarters Delegation Historical Diary, no. 3, 5/11/1942. At about 9:00 in the morning the base of the X Corps, which had withdrawn during the night of the 3rd to about 30 kilometres west of El Daba, was crossed by numerous German trucks that, though on the uneven territory on the sides of the coastal road, were running away at full speed towards the west. When he stopped one of them, the driver explained quickly: *"Tommies, Panzer Tommies kommen!"* And so the head of the Assistant Chief of Staff of the X Corps acknowledged the situation.

extremis - any active task, for the benefit of the general economy of action, which could be, for example, that of moving against the flank of the British columns advancing northwards"[124].

Some words in conclusion. It almost seems absurd: when you take a good look at the big and small operations of the 8th Army from October 23rd to November 4th, you realize they never achieved a complete result (when they achieved any) but ACIT nevertheless turned out to be at the end of its tether. This was indeed Montgomery's tactics. The Napoleonic manoeuvres left him indifferent. He simply wanted to win and win completely. Seeing that the opponent made the mistake of running a static battle and in such precarious conditions of logistic supplying, he took advantage and made them dance to his music, as he used to say. And, besides all the well-known considerations of military overwhelming strength, it would be unfair and superficial not to recognize the weight that Montgomery's determination and security had on the victory of the 8th Army.

We do not have precise data regarding the losses until 4 November at our disposal. The winner reported about 2,350 dead, 8,500 wounded and 2,260 missing. ACIT probably had 4-5,000 dead and missing, 7-8,000 wounded and 17,000 taken prisoner. All those numbers were destined to increase significantly from the first day of retreat on and reach a total of 9,000 dead and missing, 15,000 wounded and 35,000 taken prisoner.

The 8th Army lost 150 tanks (destroyed), over 500 put out of battle, and more than 100 guns of various calibres. ACIT left over 1000 artillery guns on the battlefield, either destroyed, damaged or abandoned, and more than 400 tanks, among those destroyed or put out of battle, of the initial 500.

[124] General Barbasetti's report, 2/4/1943.

Chapter six

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

1. The Operations

For Italy, the carrying out of operations in 1942 revolved around one name: Malta. The Supreme Command was obsessed with it, the two Axis Navies never passed up an opportunity to speak of it and Cavallero always complained about its missed conquest or lasting neutralisation. We know that the "ifs" do not make history, yet it is human to consider an entire campaign in a unitary framework to try to pinpoint the critical moment in it. In North Africa that moment happened during the summer. As fate would have it, two different problems were laid on the table simultaneously: the occupation of Malta and the offensive in Cirenaica.

According to Rommel, the battle of Ain el-Gazala had to be preceded by the conquest of Malta, but "*for some unexplainable reason our headquarters abandoned that plan*". Actually, he knew full well that Operation *Hercules* or C3 was postponed until after the fall of Tobruk and the reaching of the border, i.e. in mid-July. And he also knew, at least in general, the reasons for the decision: Italy was not able to successfully face the undertaking alone; Germany found it difficult to provide the aid requested by its ally (a paratrooper division; warships and aircraft; 40,000 tons of diesel for the Navy and 12,000 tons of petrol for the Air Force). For this Rommel was given *carte blanche:* after all, he had guaranteed a couple of weeks would be sufficient.

In Berchtesgaden, at the conference at the end of April, Kesselring's intervention turned out to be determining. Extremely convinced that the next objectives had to be Malta and Tobruk, both necessary, and initially oriented to give priority to the island, he ended up supporting Rommel's proposals to first carry out the land offensive, just considering the aforementioned temporary drawbacks. Then, after the victory at Tobruk and no later than the July full moon, Operation *Hercules* would be given the go ahead. In the meantime, the preparations would be brought to completion, so that the undertaking would not present any risk of failure. Cavallero, as reluctant as he was, accepted the change in priorities, realizing that in the end Kesselring was right to maintain that, just assuming the immediate tuning up of the machine for the invasion of Malta, the Italo-German attack of the island would have led Auchinleck to throw himself on Rommel. Moreover, the Axis planes would have been taken out of Cirenaica and the RAF would have dominated almost unopposed.

The clamorous victory at Marmarica ended on 21 June. Rommel immediately asked the Supreme Command and the OKW, through von Rintelen, to aim beyond the border *"to the heart of the Egyptian zone"*. Despite the brilliant success, however, the general situation had worsened. Malta was recovering full offensive activity and the air-naval battle in mid-June had depleted the last stocks of diesel of the Italian Navy: the battleships were immobilised in the ports with empty fuel tanks. This happened precisely when the opportunity presented itself to lay a hand on the Malta matter!

Hitler, never personally convinced of the feasibility, as much as the opportunity, of the undertaking and already having responded negatively to the Italian request for diesel, had Jodl answer that the surrender of Tobruk had changed the circumstances and, as a consequence, the conquest of Malta did not appear necessary. Rommel's prospects of further land victories were very attractive, and as Kesselring said, he exercised an almost hypnotic influence over Hitler. Other factors were the convenience of thoroughly exploiting success to take full advantage of the British collapse; the immense spoils gathered at Tobruk, which would allow for the supplying of the effort in depth; the fact that *Hercules* could not be started before the end of August in any case, as the Duce admitted (through Cavallero) in his letter on 20 June to the Führer.

Obviously, there was also the other side of the coin: the aviation would become ever more embroiled in the fighting in North Africa, German air divisions had to leave Sicily in a very short time and, more importantly, the exploiting of success would not take place against the rest of Ritchie's forces, as Rommel asserted, but rather against the 8th Army that Auchinleck intended to take away from the enemy with a retreating manoeuvre.

For Hitler the positive factors counted, given that they coincided with his profound aversion to *Hercules*. So, he convinced Mussolini that *"in this historic hour that will not be repeated"* it was necessary to launch *"the goddess of the battle"* at once. Mussolini was already convinced on his own and Hitler's emphasis simply changed his conviction to enthusiasm. So Cavallero was left isolated. For a while he deluded himself, thinking it was simply a matter of postponement, especially with the incomplete state of the preparations in mind, yet he soon understood that, for the OKW, Malta was a problem that had been overcome, at least as an occupation. A last slight hope remained: that the island could be neutralised by air if need be.

Actually, the meetings concluded on 26 June at the Italo-German Army Headquarters seem to have ended up influencing Cavallero himself.

The directives issued to Bastico, formally an order from Mussolini, fully accepted Rommel's desire to arrive at the Suez Canal. Then Malta was a closed chapter for Italy as well; in fact, as soon as he had returned to Rome (7 July), Cavallero arranged for the transformation of Operation C3 into Operation C4 (occupation of Tunisia), and on the 27th of the same month, he informed the Chiefs of Staff of the three armed forces that "*the general situation and the meteorological conditions make one predict that, for the current year, carrying out Operation C3 would be impossible*".

After the failure of the battle at Alam el Halfa and the sinking of a substantial number of steamers, Cavallero's diary (on 5 September) read that "*Malta must absolutely be put back under pressure (...). If we neutralise Malta, we will win all of the battles in Africa. If we don't, we will lose them all*". It is legitimate to object that it was not just a matter of neutralising it: it would not have been enough nor, in any way, possible. He would see it for himself in October. On 8 September, the *Seekriegsleitung* wrote.

> "To preserve our positions in the Mediterranean, protect Italy, anticipate the foreseen British offensive, thwart the enemy plan for a solid defensive front and create the premises for a direct connection between Germany and Japan, the General Staff of the Navy feels the following conditions must be satisfied:
> 1. North Africa must be kept, as long as possible, from the El Alamein positions.
> 2. The *Luftwaffe* must be strongly reinforced.
> 3. Malta must be seized.
> 4. The plan for an offensive towards the Suez Canal to be launched at a later time must be in step with the above".

The note was accompanied by a prudent addition: "*Until other news has arrived, this opinion must not be forwarded*".

It is also worth pointing out that Rommel, who had influenced Hitler so much to sacrifice Malta to the Suez Canal, admitted, only at the end of his diary, that one of the necessary measures for guaranteeing regularity in the supplying of operations in Africa was that "*Malta had to be attacked and taken*". But at that point it had evaporated in the mirage of the Egyptian desert. "*Giving up this undertaking*", Kesselring commented, "*constituted a mortal blow for the entire North African campaign*". The author of this mortal blow was Hitler himself, who never gave the necessary forces to the great Mediterranean theatre of operations at the right moment.

It really does not seem that either Cavallero or *Supermarina* had any sort of responsibility in that error (only considering 1942). Hitler's letter to Mussolini on 23 June placed a tombstone on the matter. On 19 October Cavallero said to Fougier, who appeared rather pessimistic about Kesselring's air offensive on the island, that "*Malta means winning or losing the war*". But at that point it was more a statement meant for effect. The next day, precisely while Kesselring was throwing in the towel, the following dialogue took place between Mussolini and Cavallero:

> M.: "You know, all things considered, I have come to the conclusion that instead of advancing on Marsa Matruh it would have been better to do the Malta operation".
> C.: "Duce, I understand that you feel faced with a matter of conscience, but allow me to lighten your worries. The Malta operation was prepared for August; the opportunity to march on Egypt was born after the Tobruk undertaking that happened in June".
> M.: "Yes, I also made this decision after the Führer's news about the disintegration of the 8th British Army".
> C. "Besides, we didn't have any choice, both for the time, as I told you, and because Rommel had gone on his own saying; I have orders from the Führer: I hope the Italians will follow me".
> M.: "Certainly, if the Malta operation had been ready at the time, it would have been better to do that operation".
> C.: "Look, the day in which you decided to advance in Egypt, I gave you a short memorandum in which it was written: it is fine to advance in Egypt, but it does not resolve the problem of the situation in the Mediterranean and it is still necessary to pound Malta. The diesel problem remained, then as it does now, a fundamental problem to resolve. Then like now: diesel fuel and the neutralisation of Malta"[1].

So, is it really possible to attribute the determining weight of the Axis defeat in North Africa to the missed conquest of Malta? According to some, the capture of the island would have resolved every supply problem and thus, automatically, would have assured victory at El Alamein and would have allowed to reach the Canal with unthinkable consequences. It is an opinion that rests on the very heavy influence that British Malta had in the general economy of the war, both for its offensive capabilities and, as it has been correctly pointed out, for the simple

[1] From Cavallero's diary, dated 20/10/1942.

fact of existing. It was not only about the losses caused by planes and submarines based on the island, but also the enormous burdens imposed by the escort to the convoys that were not attacked but could be, not to mention the commitment the Italian Air Force and the *Luftwaffe* were forced to dedicate to Malta[2].

Conversely, certain facts should not be ignored. It is true that Malta exercised an air threat of inarguable efficiency, yet undeniably this was limited to the central Mediterranean and, once past the Gaudo meridian, was substituted by the offence coming from Egypt. As far as the submarines were concerned, absent from the island in the period from end-of-April to end-of-July, they could easily leave from Alexandria, Haifa, Beirut and even from Gibraltar. Moreover, beginning in the month of August, a large part of the losses of ships headed to Bengasi, Tobruk, and Marsa Matruh was prerogative of planes and submarines coming from Egypt or the Middle East. So the occupation or, even less, the neutralisation of Malta would not have been enough to give complete security to our overseas transports. The simultaneous neutralisation of the harbours and airports in Egypt and the Middle East (impossible) would have been necessary as well, or else the continuity of an extremely efficient reconnaissance and security service and a just as efficient escort service for the convoys (also impossible).

In essence, it seems possible to conclude that - apart from the enormous error of having let the opportunity of seizing Malta pass during the summer - the occupation of the island would have facilitated greatly but only resolved half of the problems with supplying. And, in the overall war plan in North Africa, even if a victorious outcome of the defensive battle of El Alamein had been added to a happy outcome of Operation C3, surely many things would have been simpler, but we cannot delude ourselves that the conclusion would have been different: *Torch* was not a joke and Rommel would have been forced to retreat, with Montgomery hot on his heels every step of the way back to Tripolitania.

Let's now go on to a second controversial subject: the race for the Canal after the fall of Tobruk. First of all it is necessary to consider the matter from Rommel's point of view. From personal experience, he was convinced that the winning formula for war in the desert consisted in power multiplied by speed. The aces in the game were the armoured units and they had to be played without hesitation, or better yet with audacity.

[2] M. GABRIELE, *op. cit.*, p. 288.

"The operational and tactical audacity", Rommel liked to specify, who always appeared sensitive to the accusations of recklessness levelled by many, "should not be confused with military gambling. Audacity is an operation that only possibly leads to the desired success, but in which, even in the case of little success, you still have enough in hand to dominate the situation. Gambling, on the other hand, is a manoeuvre that can lead either to victory or to the annihilation of your unit. There are also situations that justify such a measure, especially when, according to the normal course of events, defeat is a question of time and gaining no longer holds importance, and the only possibility still existing consists in an extraordinarily risky operation"[3].

Since an elementary strategic principle imposes not conceding the defeated enemy time to reorganise, Rommel wanted to exploit the success immediately and thoroughly. His arguments in favour are well-known. The 8th Army was then *extremely weak*, so it had to be reached and annihilated before it received reinforcements from the Middle East; then it would be the turn of the few fresh British troops. The Italian Supreme Command had stated that "*only after the ports of Tobruk and Marsa Matruh had fallen into Axis hands, could they guarantee the shipping of supplies to Africa in the necessary quantities*". And yet, only the spoils from Tobruk permitted the continuation of the offensive, so the danger of coming to a standstill for want of logistic supplies did not exist.

"This was a plan that could perhaps be successful", Rommel concluded, "and was worth trying. The operation would in no way risk the existence of the army. By adapting to the circumstances, we would be able to get through any situation"[4].

Besides the cited evaluations of an operational nature, it is very probable that Rommel had felt a certain sense of superiority, in regards to the Supreme Command and the High Command, which led him to reject a calm and objective examination linked to the possible courses of action. A resentful attitude that presumably originated from the cautious measures and restrictions imposed on him since the beginning of the re-conquering of Cirenaica, in January of that year. He had always strained at the leash and often acted on his own and the results had always shown him to be right.

[3] E. ROMMEL, *op. cit.*, p. 127.
[4] *Ibid.*, p. 171.

In el-Agheila an offensive attack of limited range was conceded him and, along the way, only Mussolini's intervention had *authorised* the capture of Bengasi, however imposing the gravitation of the armoured mass to Agedabia and the maintenance of the el-Agheila defensive position. After Bengasi he had continued through the *gebel* up to the Tmimi-el Mechili line, against Cavallero's advice, who insisted on the directive of "*assuring the defence of Tripolitania in every moment and in every situation*". The Ain el-Gazala offensive was preceded by many repeated requests and laborious discussions to bring all the necessary forces forward and to set up the preliminary formation in front of the British positions. The seizing of Tobruk was also seen with many doubts and subjected to limits of time (20 June) and space: if the attack had failed the *Panzerarmee* had to halt on the Ain el-Gazala positions; in favourable circumstances the *mass* of the army was not to go beyond the Sollum-Halfaya-Sidi Omar line. Naturally, Cavallero's objections (Bastico was more inclined to favour initiatives in the end) did not derive from spiteful side-taking. As much as they were at times disputable, they depended on real Italian difficulties in getting the large units ready or in supplying.

Then, from el-Agheila on, reasoning and instinct had given Rommel a success that was not expected by anyone and his audacity was forever rewarded... with the unhappy conduct of operations on Ritchie's part. So, given that modesty certainly never figured among his principle qualities, the Field Marshal felt little disposed psychologically to accept advice and even Italian orders that could compromise his freedom of action. And, still under the psychological profile, he was underestimating the leadership on the adversary's side too much.

Was Rommel right or wrong to want to continue to the heart of Egypt? Cavallero considered the matter under the logistic aspect: the advance to the Canal only appeared possible provided that it guaranteed supplies overseas, and since these were not assured without the occupation of Malta a halt at the border positions came from this. A positive reassessment on the part of Hitler and the implementation of Operation C3 in August, as planned, in theory would have him share in the advantage of continuing the offensive, but he knew very well that giving two months to the 8th Army meant it getting on its feet stronger than ever. In short, in his opinion the Sollum-Halfaya-Sidi Omar positions represented the limit of the advance. Bastico did not have any doubts: the army had to stop at the edge of Halfaya, pushing elements forward up to Matruh, but he said without paraphrasing that it was not even worth discussing Rommel's emphatic vision of things, seeing that he could count on Hitler's assent.

It seems that Kesselring knew better than anyone else how to outline the problem, weighing the favourable aspects and the negative repercussions. In synthesis and without going into already mentioned details: for the moment the OBS was not able to neutralise Malta; some difficulties existed in moving the air bases eastwards but the aviation could be put in a position to support the army; the enemy had not been annihilated at Marmarica and the further it retreated the better its position became; an advance up to the Canal posed the risk of a new comparison of forces to the disadvantage of the Axis. In short, absolutely no to an offensive to the end, yes to continuing up to the El Alamein gap.

We know the conclusion. At the end of a global meeting, in which Rommel exhibited amazing confidence and uncooperative arrogance, naturally due to Hitler's approval, Cavallero was even too accommodating. His orders indicated the El Alamein gap as the goal for the exploitation of success and simultaneously as the departure base for the future offensive, which would have the Canal as its final objective. All things considered, it does not seem that much criticism can be made about Rommel, since all the protagonists, except for Bastico, ended up aligning with the race for the fatal El Alamein. The next step, that according to Rommel and Cavallero's orders would have to end the game, still needed to be studied.

Was it a mistake to immediately follow on the heels of the 8th Army? The opinions are also divided in this regard and many perhaps were only suggested after the fact. Aside from the Malta matter, one could not say the decision was completely wrong or, at least, the validity of the justifying factors seems real. In fact, even attaching great importance to the collective euphoria created within the Axis which was matched by a known accentuated pessimism in the British field, a cold-blooded examination of the operational choices led to deem the race for El Alamein useful and without risks.

> "Today, after the facts", Navarini commented, "it is easy to come to the conclusion that after Marsa Matruh the Africa Armoured Army had reached its breaking point logistically and, as a consequence, also tactically.
> At that time, after the successes achieved, it was logical to think we had reached the moment of being in a position to act on the basis of the assumption that every boldness was not only possible but even right and proper"[5].

[5] Report by General Navarini from April 1943.

It is also necessary to mention a factor whose weight was probably overlooked in Tobruk, at the time of the decision, but appeared in all its evidence at the end of the battle of Matruh. It is a factor that led Fuller to state: "*The way I see things is, when an army surprises the adversary with audacity, its range of action is only limited by the wear on its vehicles and the possibility of stable supplying*". After Matruh, whatever is argued, even a blind man could see that the gasping logistic support would not allow the army to reach El Alamein in an acceptable state of solidity. Only a meagre part of the troops could be pushed forward: too few to speedly break through the enemy resistance, "*the last block that the British could set up against our advance*", wrote Rommel.

Navarini himself, who was assigned the task of pushing rapidly towards El Daba, was forced to admit that

> "The tremendous wear that all the units had undergone should have represented a serious qualm about the continuation of the offensive once Marsa Matruh had been reached. To act thoroughly, as it was done, there at least needed to be the certainty that the enemy was actually reduced to the few surviving forces of the 8th Army. This was not the case".

Undoubtedly, taking the logistic factor in its larger meaning into account, we can now see that after Matruh audacity became a gamble.

Rommel did pay little attention to this factor at first, considering it an exclusively Italian competence, then he blamed it for the entire failure of the desperate race to the east. But, having the continuous thinning and ever more evident wear of the Italian and German divisions before his eyes, what value did he attribute to the clear logistic difficulties, especially in the ordinary transport sector? One could say he had intentionally ignored them. We know in what condition the *Panzerarmee* arrived at the Strait of El Alamein; this, nonetheless, reduced to a shadow of itself, was immediately thrown into an assault on the British positions, defined by Rommel himself as *"notably fortified and rendered secure"*, with an organisation more superficial than hurried. It is possible that, at that point, it was still worth trying; surely, Rommel did not nurture any doubts about his lucky star. On the other hand, von Mellenthin also, though aware of the meagreness of the army armoured forces, thought that there were hopes for victory by means of the manoeuvre that "*would force the enemy to a hasty retreat once again*".

For the sake of objectivity: in Rome success was taken for granted. On 2 July, during Cavallero's sojourn in Libya, an internal memorandum

prepared by General Fassi, Chief of the Operations Office of the Supreme Command and in August Chief of Staff of Delease, read as follows:

> "The happy development of operations underway in Egypt, making the hypothesis of an occupation in the near future of the entire Delta of the Nile probable, leads to some considerations about the detection of successive strategic operational axes:
> These could essentially be reduced to two:
> a) operations west of the Suez Canal (...);
> b) operations towards Sudan and then in upper A.O.I. (...)".

The memorandum also pointed out the advantage of leaving the first possibility to the Germans, participating with two-three Italian divisions, and the second to Italian forces exclusively.

The first attempt at overturning the British lines had a significance about which there could be no more misunderstandings. *"The response that the enemy had manifested from the very first moment"*, said Navarini, *"was such that it quickly convinced us of having reached the dead angle in which our haggard forces were no longer able to defeat the resistance"*. Von Mellenthin sadly confessed that everyone realised that the offensive, begun on 26 May and in which such palpable hopes had been placed, had come to the end of its run. Even Rommel had to admit that the unique opportunity of overcoming the remainder of the 8th Army and, with the momentum, occupying the territory east of the Canal *"with a surprise attack"* had passed for ever. But is aiming for the Canal with a surprise attack and chancy support not a gamble?

The battle of Alam el Halfa apparently came to nothing. In reality, it revealed to be a British defensive victory, of which perhaps Montgomery did not take advantage as he should have, and an indisputable sign of the Italo-German impotence, from which the Axis Headquarters were unable to extract the consequences.

Rommel completely realised this, but he did not reconsider the hypothesis, suggested to Cavallero on 17 July and repeated in the following week, amidst highs and lows in morale, of abandoning the El Alamein positions to pull back the bulk of the army under enemy pressure and manoeuvre in retreat towards the border. The Supreme Command and *Superlibia*, which, in July, had already reproached this *"tendency to retreat"*, now, in September, appeared strangely calm.

Afterwards, Mussolini stated that he had predicted what would happen and declared it was a mistake not to have retreated the Italian troops

on the Sollum-Halfaya line[6], but evidently he had forgotten his own orders on 19 July, in which, inciting the preparation for the battle of the Delta in a few weeks, he prescribed conserving the current lines at all costs, discarding every other hypothesis *a priori*.

Furthermore, on 7 September, at *Palazzo Venezia,* Kesselring had expressed to Mussolini the opinion that El Alamein should be kept and that the prospect of resuming the offensive to the Canal should not be abandoned[7]. This detail is not confirmed by Cavallero, present at the meeting, but the decision to continue sending fuel to Rommel *"as if the offensive were about to begin"* would find strong support.

Later on, during his visit to the Führer in late September, Rommel would declare the abandoning of the El Alamein positions was not necessary and Hitler remained satisfied, seeing as how neither he nor the OKW, according to von Rintelen, were inclined to voluntarily renounce an achieved position.

In short, in September, the confidence in being able to resist Montgomery's expected offensive without much concern and, subsequently, to resume the advance towards the Canal had grown stronger in everyone - the Supreme Command, the OKW, *Delease,* the ACIT Headquarters, the troops. It was understood that reinforcements, reserves, means and materials were necessary but the OKW gave every guarantee[8].

It was at this point that the second error was committed, after that of abandoning the Malta operation, and the responsibility for it can be traced back to Rommel himself. Mancinelli says it well. Rommel was not a man who could simultaneously cultivate different concepts: at that point the conviction of being able to face the enemy firmly in place dominated and there was no doubt about the security of the army. In fact, he neglected the opportunity to study the retreat of ACIT in the worst case scenario that he alone had pointed out, and he did not even stop to choose between a delaying manoeuvre and a retreat manoeuvre as general guide. It was a serious omission.

As we know, the question of a retreat exploded during the third battle of El Alamein. According to many, starting with the Supreme Command and the OKW, it was necessary to insist on a fierce resistance to the bitter

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[6] BENITO MUSSOLINI, *Storia di un anno*, Milan, Mondadori, 1944, p. 9.

[7] K. ASSMAN, *op. cit.*, p. 272.

[8] Rommel knew that the OKW had equipped the 7th and 10th *Panzerdivision* for the African environment and probably deluded himself that he would receive them. Instead, later on, the 7th Division was sent to Russia.

end, that being the best existing position beyond the border. According to others, instead, a timely retreat manoeuvre was the only possibility of bringing down the British offensive into nothing and saving a good part of the army.

Remaining on such a forward line represented a mistake also in Alexander's opinion. A solid position established at Matruh or at Sollum-Halfaya, with a covering battalion pushed up or left at El Alamein, "*would have presented a much more difficult problem to solve*". At another time he even sustained that a retreat of the sort "*would have greatly reinforced the Axis positions in North Africa and I don't feel that I could state that we would have been able to defeat the Afrika Korps in that case*"[9]. With *Torch* being in progress? Montgomery limited himself to adjudicating, "*If I had not remained extremely firm and had not insisted that my plan be thoroughly executed, we would not have won at El Alamein*"[10].

Auchinleck had chosen retreat rather than risking the 8th Army and he only stopped when just the Delta remained behind him. Rommel could have done it as well, knowing that he was able to cede some hundred kilometres of desert to Montgomery to his own advantage. In other words, for the 8th Army the El Alamein gap represented the last beach, but not for ACIT.

Having said that and accepting an immediate retreat as a response to the warning signs of the offensive, it must however be agreed that, in practice, such a simple solution presented so many psychological blocks as to almost make one think it was fated. Who, at that point, would have had to make a proposal? Was it Rommel, before going on leave or during his visits to the Supreme Command or the OKW? Or Stumme, after having been put in the post as a *replacement* for just one month? Or Barbasetti, who was in Ain el Gazala and knew the situation through Mancinelli's communications? Or Bastico, who was confined in Tripolitania? Or Kesselring, who had declared himself in favour of resistance in place on principle and conviction? We know very well which way the wind blew in Rome and Rastenburg. Moreover, although Kesselring had later admitted the possibility that the two Axis High Commands would have accepted a proposal for retreat from Rommel without excessive discussion, it is thought that such a strange idea would have been rejected with hostility and disdain.

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[9] H. ALEXANDER, *Memorie*, *cit.*, p. 43.

[10] B. MONTGOMERY, *Memoirs*, *cit.*, p. 139. The reply that Wellington gave Creevey, a member of parliament who followed him to Brussels and congratulated him on the victory at Waterloo, comes to mind: "Goddam, I don't really believe we would have made it if I hadn't been there!".

Therefore it was up to Rommel just back in Egypt, when the battle had already begun. His first worried reports met with scepticism and criticism. The OKW kept quiet. For Cavallero, he was an alarmist, for Kesselring indecisive, for Goering a pessimist, for Barbasetti uncertain. He asked to speak with Cavallero, but he did not consider going to the appointment. He saw Barbasetti and implored that his words be brought only to Mussolini and Cavallero's knowledge, as the situation was getting dramatic. Then things got worse.

To tell the truth, on 2 November the battle did not seem compromised to Barbasetti yet: the troops in line were neither beaten nor threatened by being surrounded; the British forces were contained to the north and pushed back to the south; there were only heavy losses for the *Trento* and the 164th Infantry Division. "*A retreat*", he commented, "*is taking place exclusively by Rommel's decision, on the basis of an assessment of the situation*" and to the surprise of the X Corps. While this transparent criticism may appear excessive, what is certainly appropriate is the accusation of not having given orders in time to the services, nor to the Matruh and Siwa sectors that depended on ACIT.

It should be remembered that, in the late morning of the 2nd, Westphal had provided the Chiefs of Operations branches of the Italian Army Corps with a general orientation, with a precise reference to 5 November: retreat on the Fuka line in three stages, with two alternating motor echelons. Vehicles were an Italian responsibility. A retreat that had little or nothing to do with the one mentioned by Rommel in July and an unrealistic assumption of motor vehicles. Rommel did not speak of the subject with Navarini, Nebbia and De Stefanis and he was wrong not to. He did not inform Barbasetti to be ready to gather the army on the Sollum-Halfaya embankment if the troops were partially overrun. He did not have the delegated quartermaster informed, though aware of how precious the few existing resources were.

The last question remains: was the third battle of El Alamein necessary, after the second had made the end of the ACIT advance evident, when Malta was returning to full efficiency and the imminence of *Torch* was known? Alexander admitted that a political aim was assigned to that conflict besides a military one. In the first respect, London aimed to persuade the French of North Africa not to oppose the landings, to encourage the Soviets, tenaciously engaged in Stalingrad, to raise the morale in Great Britain and the Commonwealth. On the military level, defeating Rommel meant advancing towards Tripolitania simultaneously with the troops

landed in Morocco and Algeria, in this way reducing the time needed for the total conquest of the African coasts in the Mediterranean.

Alexander then completed his thoughts stating he was "*certain that the 1st British Army and II American Corps would never have been able to conquer Tunisia and Biserta without help*". In other words, El Alamein helped *Torch* because the 8th Army completely defeated ACIT and was able to proceed eastwards to give the Anglo-Americans a helping hand. Operation *Torch* did not help El Alamein because it took place afterwards, because it constituted too much of a long term threat and because it would not even have arrived in Tunisia alone[11].

2. Logistics

Usually, except in rare occasions, a first look at the functioning of the logistic apparatus of an army at war reveals two diametrically opposed points of view: everything worked well for the Logistic Headquarters, implying that the statement is valid *depending on the circumstances*; for the troops very little appeared acceptable, suggesting that the impact of the circumstances should not, however, burden those who are fighting. The events of 1942 do not escape the general rule: tendency, at a high level, to present things as more than satisfying; rancorous criticism, at a low level, for the discomforts suffered in almost all sectors of services, especially from June on. It is easy to understand how both sides are right and wrong at the same time. No logistic organisation can depart from the autonomy given to it and from the means of transport assigned to it. Any insufficiency in these areas has repercussions on the units and, what is worse, to different extents, as inevitably the units on the front line or in poor conditions will be worst served, while those favoured by distance ratios or by ease of communication will be better supplied. This will provoke bitter conflicts and difficult disputes.

As a consequence, first the High Command and then *Delease*, finding themselves administering what arrived from the homeland and the few resources already available in Libya, could declare that the North Africa Logistic Headquarters had done what was materially possible and, conversely, the divisions in line had many valid reasons for recrimination.

The reasons why plans were made in a haphazard fashion, the bread was badly made and too often turned out to be mouldy and in good part

[11] H. ALEXANDER, *Memorie, cit.*, p. 43.

inedible at the time of distribution did not matter to the troops; or else why the fresh or frozen meat was so rarely given and often, on arrival, had to be buried for how rotten it was; or why the fabric of the uniforms and leather of the footwear appeared so shabby as to have an enormously inferior service life if compared with the tables of the Army Service Corps. Naturally, the matter of footwear represented a daily tragedy for the infantryman. *"It was truly piteous and painful"*, Gen. Scotti, commander of the *Trento*, wrote in his report, *"to see people forced to march on the wicked terrain of Marmarica or Egypt shoed like beggars or even barefooted"*. Fortunately, at least... the enemy helped us out, by abandoning substantial quantities of excellent, robust and resistant shoes in Tobruk and Matruh.

The logistic organisation of a military zone bases its functionality on three pillars: personnel in charge of various services, supplies and means of transport. As for the personnel, it is sufficient to point out that on 26 October *Delease* requested the sending of a good 277 non-commissioned officers and 3,093 troops (two thirds of whom were considered urgently needed) to *compensate for the organic deficiencies* of the Logistic Headquarters.

As for the supplies, it is necessary to refer to a situation at the end of June. At that time, in Rome, they were trying to calculate how to accomplish the desired autonomy in North Africa in two months. An extraordinary assignment was necessary, more than the current 40,000 tons a month of ordinary supplies; an assignment of 83,000 tons subdivided as follows:

Health materials	99 tons
Foodstuff for Italians	11,150 tons
Foodstuff for Germans	3,200 tons
Clothing and equipment	150 tons
Ammunition	30,000 tons
Engineer materials	20,000 tons
Fuel	17,300 tons
Motor vehicle materials	1,000 tons
Chemical services	200 tons

The assessment conducted by the S.M.R.E. (General Army Staff) about the possibility of granting need on the basis of availability and dividing the materials in extraordinary monthly assignments was based on the July-September 1942 interval of time and immediately led to a first cut in the area of munitions. The intention was to be able to grant 10 *unfoc* for machine-

guns, mortars and supporting cannons, 14 *unfoc* for field artillery and anti-air artillery and 13 *unfoc* for the heavy field and heavy artilleries, but these levels were nearly cut in half. It would only be possible to send 16,000 tons of the 30,000 tons necessary by the end of the year. A second cut was made in engineer materials: 10,600 tons instead of the 20,000 tons necessary.

After establishing this, the ammunition and the provisions would be sent in monthly allotments while the other materials could be immediately put at the disposal of the High Transport Department, which would be responsible for the flow to the ports of embarkation whenever the possibility of loading presented itself. Nevertheless, "*according to recent forecasts made by the High Transport Department it is to be excluded that the whole program of extraordinary transports of 60,000 tons can be accomplished by December*". This program, "*in the most favourable projections*", could be relied upon for just 25,000 tons. In other words, instead of amassing supplies for two months, it would not be possible to exceed 18 days!

Furthermore, the request for 83,000 tons of extraordinary supplies forwarded by the North Africa Logistic Headquarters was presumably based on data of average value, without taking into account consumption for major battles (which would have been provided for *a posteriori*, by restoring the levels with ordinary supplies). And moreover, the already unsatisfactory granting of requests by the Central Authority was considered fulfilled at the *ports of embarkation*, without taking into account the nearly certain partial losses due to the sinking of steamers. This would have all been tolerable if the ordinary supplies had at least been sufficient and secure. Instead, the 40,000 tons a month not only proved to be inadequate overall, but they did not consider both the already ascertained non availability of ammunition and engineer materials and the sinking of merchant ships.

In conclusion: the calculations were made in *the most favourable hypothesis* (nothing wrong), without taking into account *the most unfavourable hypothesis* (quite wrong). Obviously, it was the latter that occurred.

Finally, the drama with motor vehicles is so well-known that it is not even worth talking about it. However, there is also a reason to doubt the full exploitation of the already limited resources. For example, regarding the recovery and repairing of vehicles and materials, it was an activity that agreeing testimonies thought to be carried out decisively at a lower level than the circumstances required. Not even a personal intervention by

Cavallero was able to improve it much, despite its evident importance. It is also true that a good part of the responsibility for this falls on Central Authority. It is worth citing the events of two Logistic Headquarters establishments requested by the High Command in *October 1941*, and precisely an army park workshop and a motor vehicle workshop. To satisfy the request, it was necessary to urgently get machinery and equipment, not to mention personnel, ready. At the end of December, the General Department of Motor Vehicles had provided for the materials, drawing almost all of them from their own warehouses, while the General Department of Civilian Personnel and General Affairs, that immediately took an interest in the recruitment of 300 specialised civilian workers, communicated the hiring of just 12 workers. The High Department of Technical Service of Motor Vehicles, approached in turn, made known the absolute impossibility of finding specialised military personnel. As a result, the High Department of Motor Vehicles informed the S.M.R.E. that everything was at a standstill and so it was necessary to draw the military automobile mechanics from the non-motorised units, wherever detached, and/or revoke the exemption of mechanics at civilian establishments belonging to junior classes, who would be automatically substituted by senior personnel.

At the *end of February 1942*, the machinery and equipment for the two Logistic Headquarters establishments could still be found set aside in Piacenza, while the matter of personnel had made a small, and not decisive, step forward: requirements limited to 186 specialised civilian workers (120 for the park workshop and 66 for the motor vehicle workshop), availability of 66 workers (39 military and 27 civilian). On the other hand, about 3,000 vehicles sat waiting for major repairs in Libya.

In the *second half of July* the aforementioned personnel was finally sent to Tripoli, where most of the 27 civilian workers proved to be of a very poor level. In the meantime, the decision had passed to incorporate the facility of the two original establishments into an automobile repair park workshop (called OPRA) of a technical industrial nature, separate from the North Africa Logistic Headquarters and put into the direct dependence of the General Department of Motor Vehicles. The monthly range of repairs should have been around 200-250 vehicles in the first two months of operation, to then reach 400-500 general checks, besides a significant number of complete overhauls.

On *19 September* the S.M.R.E. ordered the concentration of 169 military personnel, nominated individually, in Piacenza - where the equipment for the two famous workshops was still being held. On *16 October* a

second list of 110 other military personnel was issued to be transferred to Piacenza by the end of the month[12].

Of course, such failures happened in other sectors as well, so that it becomes very difficult to re-appraise Kesselring's criticism concerning our system and the speed of organizing work during the war.

As far as the services for the large units were concerned, the want in almost every area had led to "concentrations" that, though acceptable on a theoretical level, became debatable since they translated into taking away nearly everything from the divisions and even the army corps, which should have been a supply base in the logistic chain. The role of the corps was covered, to some extent, by the Logistic Headquarters Delegation no. 3. Needless to say, this measure caused transports to keep the divisions perennially in crisis. Furthermore, it made the Germans feel a profound distrust in *Delease*. The German system that was generally followed entailed leaving the necessary means to the large units and only centralising the surplus. No wonder, then, that the ACIT Headquarters, in comparing the availabilities of the two Logistic Headquarters, came to the conclusion that the Italian part was... much richer than the German.

Let's now go on to supplies from Italy during the period January-October 1942, on the basis of the data provided by the S.M.R.E. - Ordering Office on the date of 31 January 1943. Civilian and military ships (including motor rafts) and aircraft employed to transport personnel and materials to North Africa are shown in the table on the following page.

As it is easy to verify, a sudden increase in shipments from the homeland took place in July, but it should also be pointed out that it did not depend on the availability of the port of Tobruk, as only some tankers, some submarines and a few German personnel transport ships went to Tobruk in that month. The low level of maritime shipments in the first six months is striking, such as to lead one to agree with the criticisms of many that attribute a good part of the responsibility for the disaster at El Alamein to the lack of concentration of every energy to send a much greater number of ships to Africa, when it was possible. It is worth pointing out that the accusation concerns the organisational and executive aspects of more than one sector, at the centre and on the periphery, both on departure and

[12] It should be noted that, at the end of October 1942, *Delease* requested the SMRE Services Office send to Africa 586 quintals of spare parts, 620 quintals of workshop machines and other materials from SATA, a company that only worked for the North Africa Logistic Headquarters. Those materials had been lying in Naples waiting to be loaded for *a few months* (Historic diary of *Delease*, ph. 214 dated 20/10/1942).

on arrival; and not apart from the disastrous decision of bringing the CSIR to the army level, with all the consequent logistic burdens.

Transports for North Africa				
	ships			
Month			planes	
	Departures	losses (*)		Events
January	28	1	294	Italo-German offensive
February	14	1	240	
March	23	3	436	neutralisation of Malta
April	41	2	454	
May	33	2	256	battle of Ain el-Gazala
June	18	2	313	naval battle
July	81	2	810	1st battle of El Alamein
August	57	4	821	2nd battle of El Alamein, naval battle
September	49	7	683	3rd battle of El Alamein
October	44	10	929	neutralisation of Malta
Total	388	34	5.236	

(*) All civilian; however there are some slight discrepancies with the *Supermarina* data.

According to Gen. Giglioli, Chief of Staff of *Superlibia*, the important thing was landing men and materials in Africa in any port or airport, even if far away from Egypt. The fuel consumption for transport into the zone of engagement was not equal to the loss of a ship and its cargo. Having wanted to send ships to Tobruk from July to October cost dearly in terms of sunk or damaged ships and lost materials. "*Specific periods of little enemy activity against our maritime traffic*", he wrote, "*were not taken advantage of enough to constitute adequate autonomy in Africa*"[13].

A comparison with supplies flowed to Alexander is useless, also because it would be rather disheartening for us. The 4,000 vehicles landed in Libya can appear respectable given our conditions, but what can be said faced with the 71,000 vehicles that reached the Middle East between January and September 1942? And what can 370 field pieces represent versus the approximately 6,000 sent by Great Britain and the United

[13] Report by General Giglioli on the date of 16/4/1943.

States? Or the 850 tanks versus the 2,500 Anglo-American, without considering the arrivals in the month of October?

The most significant Axis shipments were divided as follows:								
Month	personnel		field pieces		vehicles		tanks	
	Italian*	German	ship.	lost	ship.	lost	ship.	lost
January	5,698	1,195	63	–	369	–	123	–
February	5,258	178	72	–	287	–	56	–
March	9,814	1,011	28	6	350	13	69	–
April	8,992	2,580	94	–	821	–	184	–
May	8,341	574	10	–	794	81	106	6
June	6,158	712	1	–	240	106	37	–
July	14,270	1,469	69	–	1,076	108	124	15
August	13,743	210	25	3	433	237	116	1
September	6,999	376	5	18**	209	70	38	20
October	13,237	214	35	4	296	189	54	16
Totals	92,510	8,519	402	31	4,875	804	907	58

* of the three armed forces and including 4,783 civilians.
** an error in the data of the S.M.R.E. is evident, perhaps it was an inversion with the losses of August or October.

The other types of materials have the following figures:					
Health materials	arrived	1,237	tons	of	1,252
Logistic HQ materials	"	102,812	"	"	104,808
Automobile spare parts	"	4,393	"	"	4,710
Engineer materials	"	29,558	"	"	29,880
Artillery shells	"	6,774,800	rounds	of	6,809,300

As a complement to the reported data, it is necessary to add that the shipments had absorbed substantial percentages of the current domestic product[14]. For example:

[14] These percentages are to be considered as orientating because they were actually calculated on the basis of shipments made in all of 1942, that is including the months of November and December, which have instead been excluded from our data.

20 mm guns	50%
47/32 guns	82%
Field pieces	equivalent production plus 50% taken from the stock
Heavy field pieces	35%
Anti-air pieces	78%
Motor vehicles	52%
Tanks	81%

As far as fuel was concerned, 109,293 tons are shown as being shipped in the first ten months, of which 99,386 arrived in North Africa. It should be kept in mind, however, that the type of transport considerably influenced the real tonnage. A tanker with a 10,000-ton capacity had or could actually have 10,000 tons of fuel, while a cargo ship of the same capacity could only carry 4,000 in barrels. Add to that that, for 1,000 tons of loose fuel, 7,000 barrels were necessary, equal to 350 tons of iron. Thus the advantage of using tankers is evident. Unfortunately, not only were tankers an easier target for the enemy, but they also required adequate containers in the ports where they were unloaded, into which the fuel could be delivered directly at the highest speed allowed by the pumps (150-250 tons/hour depending on the type of fuel). In our case, the small tankers found very poor equipment in Bengasi or Tobruk, so the unloading (with chancy means) was very slow and part of the fuel was lost. The only truly equipped port in this regard was Tripoli, where the possibility of warehousing reached 40,000 tons. What strategic and logistic improvidence!

The sinking and damaging of merchant ships was the consequence of insufficient naval construction activity. Kesselring cast the blame on various factors, among which lacking allotments of raw materials and spare parts to the shipyards; the rhythm of work was the same as at peace time; reluctance by the ship-owners and builders who tended instead to preserve their ships for after the war. But there was an interesting petition submitted to Cavallero on 5 August by Achille Lauro and Angelo Costa precisely to this last purpose, in the name of the Italian shipbuilders. The petition aimed at finding a solution to two problems of equal urgency and importance: the best use of the existing ships and the reconstruction of those lost.

First issue. Above all, it asked for the abolition of certain security regulations. In short, it translated into a reduction of the cargo to two-thirds (but, in 1941, to half) of the maximum capacity, so the ship would possibly stay afloat even if damaged with extended flooding and, in the worst case, would lose a minor quantity of material. Against this measure, the petition debated that, even leaving modest cargo margins, a greater per-

centage of ships were at risk. Persuaded by the argument, Cavallero ordered that the cargo be immediately brought up to 90% or, for motor vehicles, fuel and ammunition, to the maximum possible[15].

The serious problem of the periodic maintenance of the ships in use followed. Since the beginning of the war, no merchant ships had ever had a normal repair and maintenance shift, because they were all utilised without interruption. It was evident that the age and wear would soon limit their speed, with obvious increased risks, and then their use would be blocked. Even more complex was the prompt repair of the damaged ships. It was necessary to provide the ports of call, in which the repairs could be carried out, with tow boats for the rapid transfer of the ships into port. It was also necessary to widen the short list of ports fitted out with the facilities for the most urgent repairs, especially in the Puglia region, and to avoid overloading some ports with work while others were empty, as it had happened at times. In other words, there was a lot to revise and a lot to get ready.

As far as rebuilding lost ships was concerned, the shipbuilders manifested a clear aversion to the ships of average capacity and modest speed included in the Host-Venturi plan in the new Merchant Navy War Program for 1943 scheduled by the Inspectorate for Merchant Navy Constructions and Navy Shipyards[16]:

10 tankers .....9,000 tons p.l., speed 14 knots
18 cargo steamers .....4,000 tons p.l., speed 14 knots
8 cargo steamers .....2,000 tons p.l., speed 12 knots
19 cargo motor ships .....750 tons p.l., speed 9 knots
12 cargo motor ships .....650 tons p.l., speed 9 knots

These characteristics proved unsatisfactory, especially for speed. Without coming to a comparison of a technical nature, which would lead to considering the advantages and disadvantages of every solution with a subjective choice, it can be observed that Germany also seemed to rely on that type of ship, having ordered twelve steamers with 5,000-ton gross capacity and about 12-knot speed, based on their own plans.

[15] It is not possible to know who gave the order not to utilise the full loading capacity. Presumably, the Transport Authority did. But the curious thing is that, in the Libyan ports, this negative characteristic was pointed out and complained about, without it coming, however, from a precise order, so much so that it led to attributing the fact to an oversight at the loading port or the non availability of materials on departure.

[16] According to Cavallero, the plan referred to in the petition does not coincide with the one indicated by Favagrossa (*op. cit.*, p. 181). However, neither of them would be implemented.

The petition was undoubtedly aware of the interests of the shipbuilders, but also brought to light some unfortunately typical aspects of the Italian State. Firstly: the State could, according to the laws in force, requisition or lease a ship. In the case of requisition, the compensation for loss was equal to 100% of the estimated value; in the other case, to 60-70% percent. Secondly: after two years of war, the shipbuilders had not received compensation for losses suffered nor did they yet know the fiscal value; furthermore, as the shipbuilders' credit was increasing, the Minister of Finance had decreed... the block of such credit. Thirdly: when Italy took the field, 212 Italian ships, almost a third of the merchant fleet, were surprised around the world; consequently, most of them had found refuge and internment in neutral ports, others were captured. So the Government ended up selling the interned ships to other governments without the ship owners having any knowledge or having received credit, despite expenses sustained in the meantime.

In practice, every aspect of supplying overseas hit painful notes. In the ports of departure, shortages of every sort were present. The loading of merchant ships in Italy, and even more so in Greece, required excessive time because the materials were rarely ready on time or because of local failings. In July no merchant ship was able to complete *two* voyages to Libya. The large motor ships that had reached Brindisi on the 6th of that month took to sea again after 14 days (the *Pilo*), 17 days (the *Pisani*) and even 28 days (the *Sestiere*).

In the ports of arrival the problems were generally tied to inadequacies in the harbour: Bengasi did not exceed 1,500 tons a day, Tobruk barely reached 1,000 tons and Marsa Matruh 300 tons (when it could work). To this well-known bottleneck were added the excessive dead times in the port operations, warehousing limitations for fuel, scarcity of labour, inadequate anti-air defence.

The organisation of the escorts had also aroused numerous controversies, but only in September, after General Geloso's report about the frequent empty trips of the fighters based in Greece due to the lack of timely notification of changes in route and convoy schedules, even after Kesselring's intervention, the Supreme Command decided to establish two coordinating bodies: the already mentioned Escort Committee and the Combined Naval and Air Force Committee, intended to regulate the matter.

When the feeling became clear that the quantity of supplies from the homeland was not adequate to the necessities of the moment or of ACIT, it was decided to exploit the war ships. The suggestion, made by the Germans, derived from two assumptions, both dubious: that the shortage of flow was mainly caused by the British offensive and the war ships could perform the

task of transporting materials in an efficient way. The meagre quantities transported to Africa by torpedo-boat destroyers and submarines make the real usefulness of taking war ships away from their normal duties uncertain.

All things considered and, to repeat, despite the considerable efforts made by the Supreme Command and the Chiefs of Staff of the armed forces, the logistic and economic subject of war cannot be abandoned without profound dissatisfaction. Kesselring, again, took an interest in the matter and had more than one occasion to discuss it with Cavallero and, later on, with General Ambrosio. He ended up declaring himself convinced of the insufficient utilisation of war potential, the bad organisation of war production and the defective definition of problems. The observations are raw, but not far from the truth. Mitigating factors exist, but there are also completely gratuitous errors that are not at all justified, and the right men were not always put in the right posts.

3. Action of Command

The summary flowcharts of the organisation of the Italo-German forces acting in North Africa (no.1), the Italian Air Forces in North Africa (no.2), and the German forces operating in the Mediterranean (no. 3) are reported in the following pages with reference to September 1942.

In the first of these, what is striking is the greatest defect that can exist in a theatre of operations and a battlefield: the absence of a command unit. Even if Bastico was in the driver's seat until August, despite interference by the Supreme Command and the OKW drawn in by Rommel when it was convenient for him, and the Chiefs of Staff of the Armed Forces, the establishment of *Delease* meant a breakdown in the balance. Going over the genesis of the procedure again is useless, a procedure literally imposed by Cavallero for personal reasons, but the operational unease of *Superlibia* and ACIT is evident, both having been deprived of the logistic apparatus and direct recourse to the 5th Air Squadron and Navy units.

It is also true that, until the summer, a progressive increase in Rommel's display of independence was witnessed, so that at times Cavallero found himself having to intervene almost more in the role of peacemaker than General Chief of Staff. Nevertheless, with *Delease*, the greater autonomy conceded to Rommel found a more pronounced limitation in the logistic field.

Aside from a sort of "flexible joint" wanted by Cavallero, it is thought that a huge error was made in the regulating sector when the *Panzergruppe* was established, by not giving life to an Italo-German operational headquarters.

Chart no. 1
THE ITALO-GERMAN FORCES OPERATING IN NORTH AFRICA

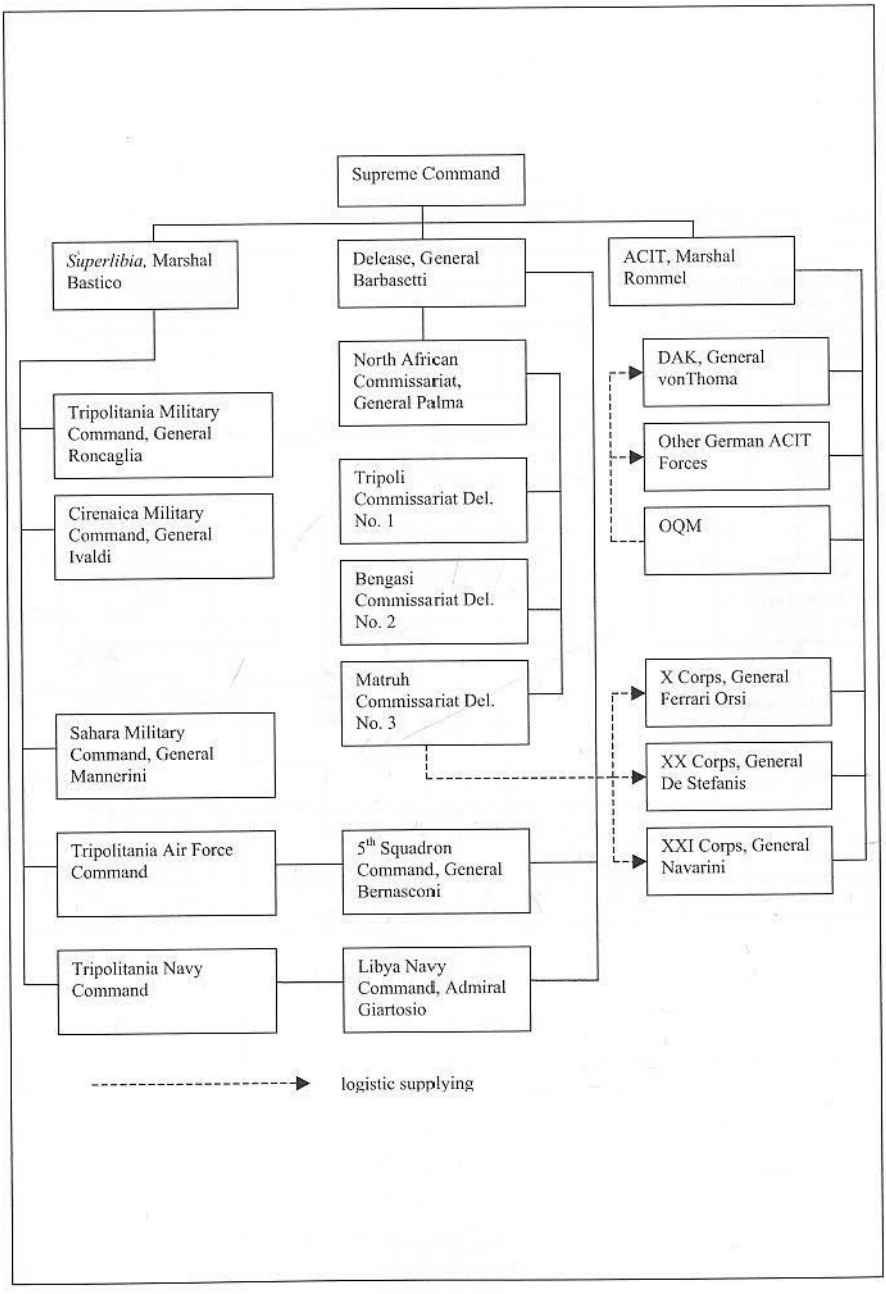


Chart no. 2
THE ITALIAN AIR FORCES OPERATING IN NORTH AFRICA

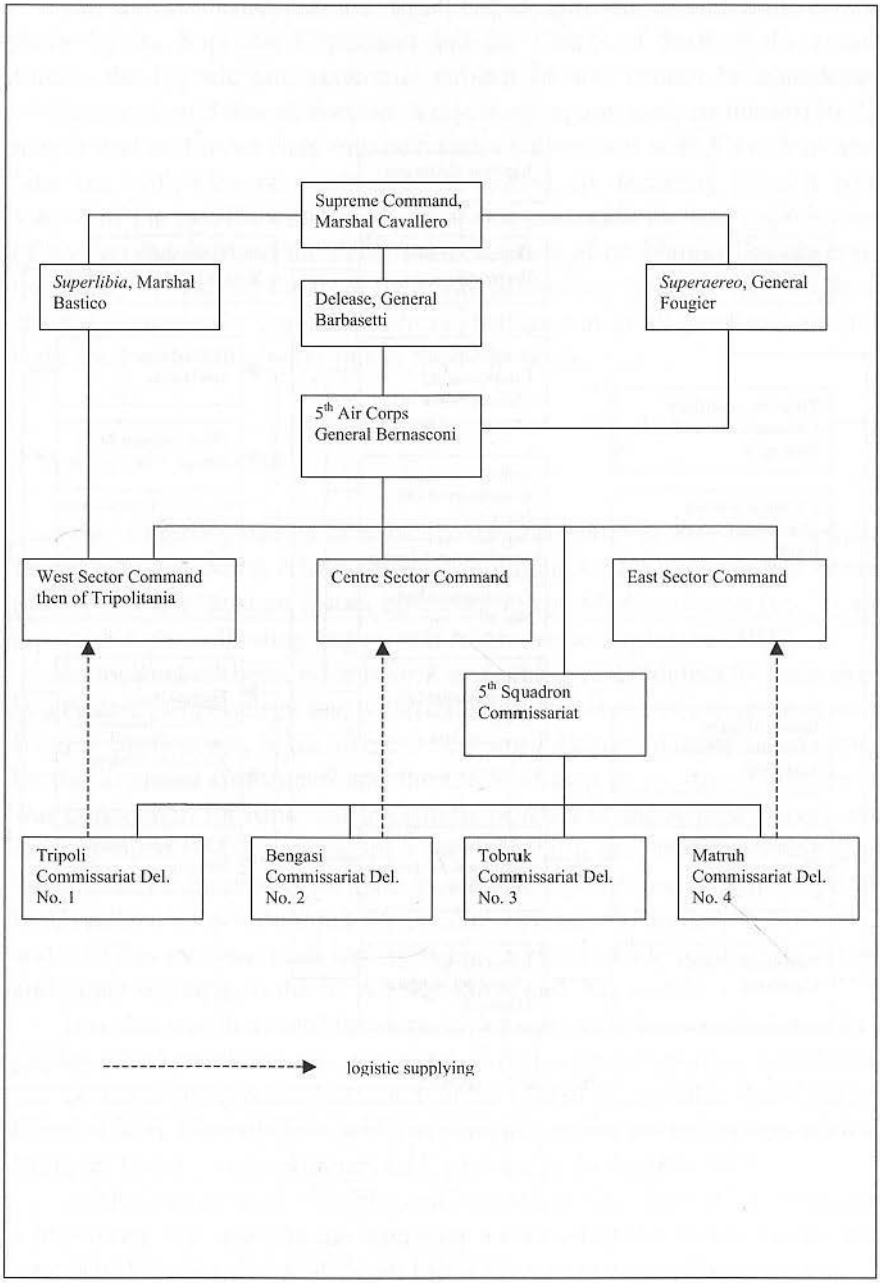
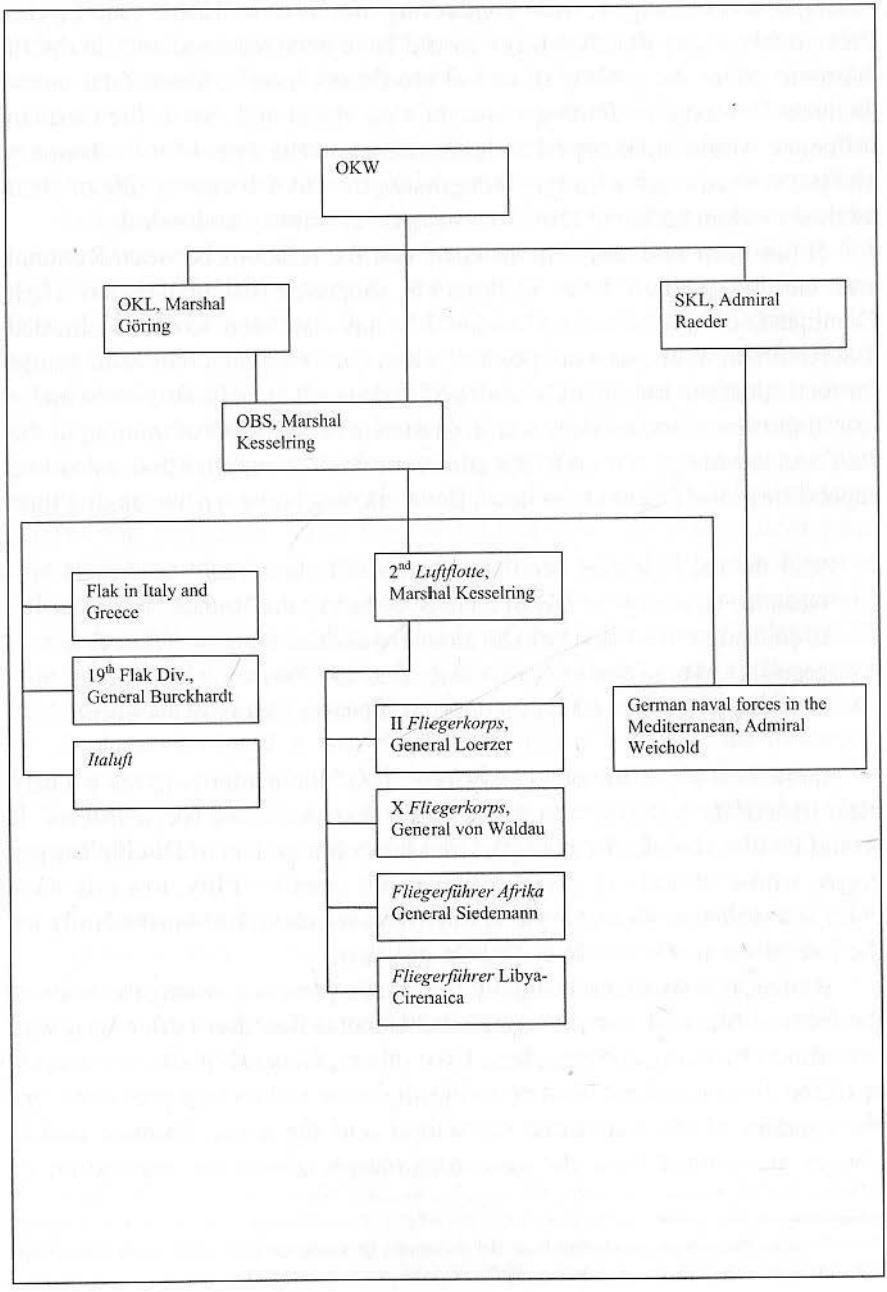


Chart no. 3
GERMAN AIR FORCES OPERATING IN NORTH AFRICA



It would have avoided the jealous principle of a theatre of operations in Italian hands, as it was seen as logic even by the OKW, and, at the same time, it would have better harmonised the allied components in the large strategic units charged with conducting the war in Libya and Egypt. Presumably, many disadvantages would have been lessened and, in the El Alamein crisis, the issuing of orders would not have suffered fatal omissions and oversights. Furthermore, let's go ahead and say it, the German influence would have appeared less incisive in the eyes of the adversary and posterity, though willingly recognising the DAK for every title of clear tactical predominance in terms of strength, efficiency and valour.

It has been said and demonstrated that the relations between Rommel and the Italian high level Commands (Supreme Command and High Command) cannot be defined as ideal. It has also been serenely admitted that Rommel, in his personal point of view, had more than one valid reason for recrimination: Italian units equipped and armed in an inadequate way for war in the desert and modern war in general, average level of training of the staff and the troops not up to the situation, flow of supplies and unloading capabilities insufficient to the need. Between this, however, and stating that:

> "(...) the Italian leaders, who already started to be secretly recalcitrant under the German yoke and who fumed at the fact that Rommel was able to do more with a single German armoured division (later two) than their generals had been able to do with more than 200,000 men at their disposal on that front, felt a malignant pleasure at putting a spoke in his wheel",

there is a big difference, very big. This, incidentally, gives a fairly clear idea of the balance with which many war events are reconstructed. It would be like stating, for example, that the commanders of Ritchie's army corps, whose attitude of disapproval, if not even hostility, towards their chief is a well-known fact (agreed in British sources), had purposefully let the fate of the battle of Ain el-Gazala go adrift.

Rather, it is worth pointing out the scarce presence among the units at the front of Marshal Bastico before and General Barbasetti after, as it was underlined by many commanders. Like others, General Scotti, commander of the *Trento*, did not hesitate to highlight the sad feeling provoked "*by the conduct of the* Superlibia *Command and the great distance that it always maintained from the operating troops, giving the impression of*

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[17] DAVID CHANDLER, *La battaglia di Ain el Gazala,* in *Storia della seconda guerra mondiale*, Milan, Rizzoli e Purnell, II vol., 1967, p. 139.

absenteeism and complete docility for the conduction of operations by Lieutenant General, then Field Marshal Rommel"[18].

About relations between the Italians and the Germans, nothing remains but to confirm what has been described previously: some coldness at the higher levels, frequent camaraderie at the lower levels, in all cases very different mentalities. The inferior operational capacity of units weighed against the Italians, due to basic deficiencies that have been well-noted at this point. To this purpose, it seems appropriate to get a clear idea of the meaning of a judgement that could be - and was - erroneously interpreted.

As it has already been mentioned, a unanimous observation emerges among all army corps, division and regiment commanders concerning the professional deficiencies in most of the reserve officers. In general, a lack of confidence characterised the actions of many high-rank officers: lacking, in fact, the technical foundations, they did not feel capable of securely and charismatically dominating the events and incidents arising in combat. Too many of them were physically or psychologically overcome by the discomforts and deprivations. Consequently, the uncertainty of the troops faced with a commander's post abandoned for physical or nervous reasons was inevitable. As for the low-rank officers, the observations were kept within certain limits, though the training provided by the Reserve Officers (A.U.C.) schools was inadequate and the efficiency of temporary recalls insufficient. Naturally, at the front the faults were eliminated or reduced without much difficulty by the junior officers, because they were fresher in their base notions, more reactive and less encumbered by rank.

A picture outlined as such - and essentially referred to the infantry - does not seem exaggerated and is validated on many levels, obviously with all the numerous exceptions. Nevertheless, it sometimes provoked strange violent criticisms and nobody can deny a significant concern reading about

> "(...) the systematic vile classification imposed by interests and the conspiracy of silence in the military caste where there is the tendency to justify generals and colonels in all the reports and statements of our General Staff and to load the burden onto the "reserves", on the "civilians" recalled to arms"[19].

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[18] Report by General Scotti on the date of 21/5/1943.

[19] GIORGIO BOCCA, *Storia d'Italia nella guerra fascista 1940-1943*, Bari, Laterza, 1969, p. 322. The discussion derives from a thought of Rommel's, who would have judged *"the reserve officers good and the regular officers discreet"*. Not that it is very important, but apart from the scant reliability of a technical comparison given the non-homogeneous terms, a similar subject does not appear in *"The Rommel Papers"*.

Since the time of Julius Caesar, the criticisms expressed in regards to a badly trained unit have always cast the blame on the commander of the unit itself and not on the subordinates. So, it seems obvious that, considering the specific technical deficiencies found in the commissioned and non-commissioned reserve officers, the responsibility should automatically be placed on the recruitment system or on the training organisation or both, and *never* on the aforementioned personnel. And when the bad exercise of command is complained about referring to many who, as platoon commanders in World War I, had been hurled to the head of a battalion at war, after twenty years of work in any peaceful profession, the reproach should obviously be made not to the people concerned, who among other things would probably have very willingly stayed at home, but rather to the ministerial authorities. Moreover, the understandable sense of bitterness, discomfort, and rancour towards the military institution has never escaped any commanding officer recalled and put into a post for which he does not feel instructed as he should be. Even a poor aptitude for leadership cannot be attributed to the individual: evidently, the selection was badly performed.

In every army it is clear that the responsibility for military training rests with the central authority for the selection of personnel and for the training program, while unit commanders are responsible for the following military training. When Montgomery first saw that the training in the 8th Army was so bad that it kept him from sending the divisions into battle, he told everyone that there was no doubt about who was to blame. So, he started replacing a number of commanders at high level. To sum up, to ascribe such evaluations to personal interests or caste would derive from lack of knowledge about the matter, rather than from the sake of controversy.

4. Epilogue

1942 saw the Italo-German divisions leave el-Agheila, arrive at El Alamein after a vivid sequence of victories and abandon Egypt forever, together with the hope of reaching the Suez Canal, an impossible objective.

The parallels made with the First World War are known: El Alamein I is to Piave 1917 like El Alamein II is to Piave 1918 and like El Alamein III to Vittorio Veneto. A decisive role was played by the two intermediate battles: the one called *of the solstice* and that of Alam el Halfa. In both cases the attack, victor in Caporetto and in Ain el Gazala-Tobruk and reorganised after the pause imposed on it by a defender with its back to the wall, sets out to achieve a breakthrough of the last obstacle and must

recognise the inadequacy of its forces. The third phase (El Alamein III and Vittorio Veneto) is not superfluous, but represents a logical conclusion to the match on the military, psychological and political level.

The 8th British Army has every right to be proud of the victory, independently of the weight of factors on its side, but ACIT resisted with stubborn tenacity up to the extreme limit of human strength. After twelve days of bitter combat, the number of Axis prisoners was still small. It would only rapidly rise after 3 November and would reach about 35,000 men in a few days. More or less as many as ACIT had captured in twenty-four hours at Tobruk, four months earlier. A note from a British source is probably the best comment on the desperate struggle sustained by the Italo-German Army: *"It is almost unbelievable how the defenders were able to resist so long"*[20].

[20] B. LIDDELL HART, *Storia militare della seconda guerra mondiale, cit.*, p. 425.

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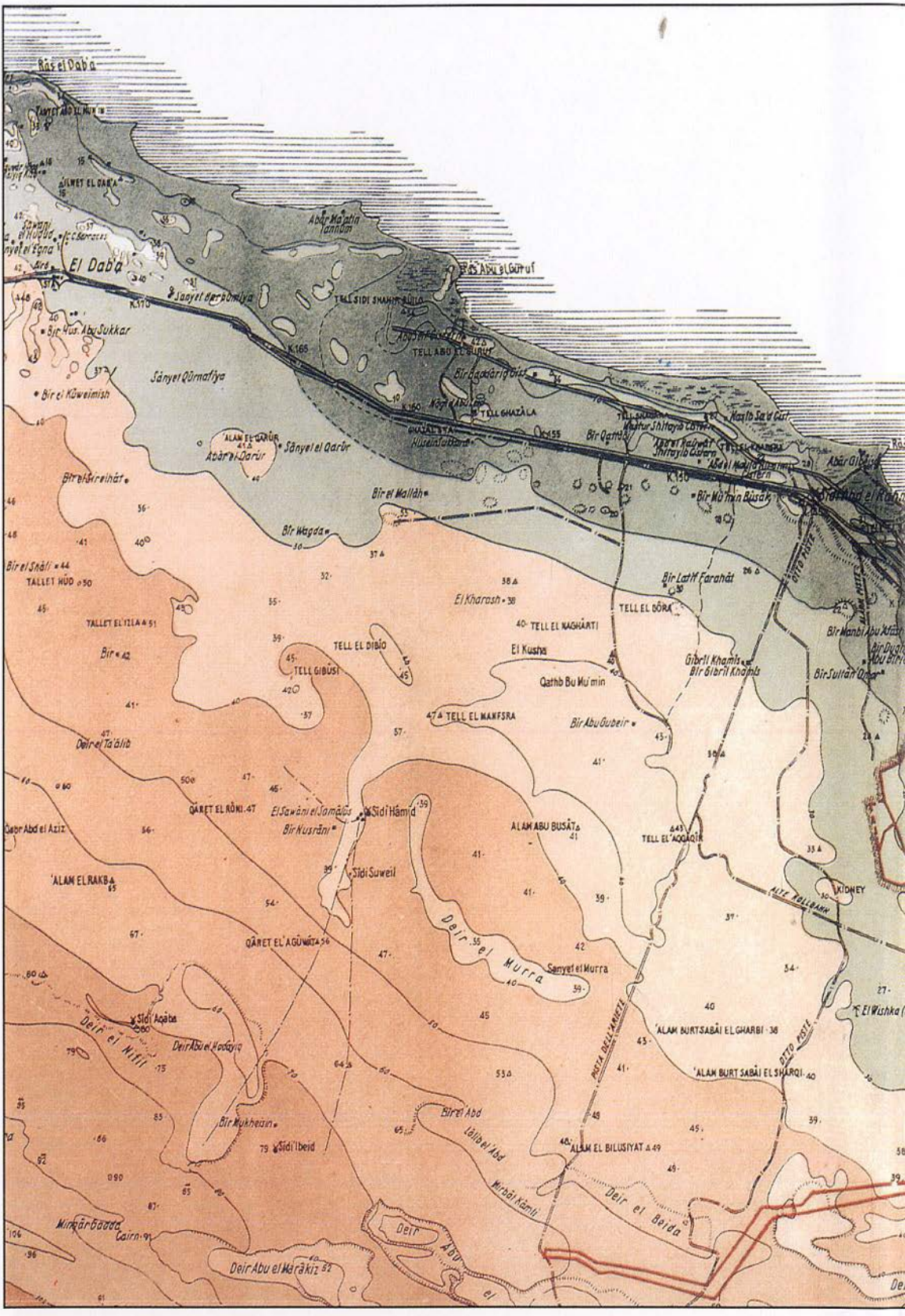
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Deir el Talib
QARET EL RUKI
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Sidi 'Ibeid
Bir el Abd
Mirkâr Gadda
Cairn
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Bir Mu'min Busak
Bir Qamsîr
TELL GHAZÂLA
TELL SIDI SHAHIR RUHA
TELL ABU EL GUFUF
Bir Gaskariga Gitt
Bir Mansi Abu Afara
Bir Sultan Omar
Bir Gibril Khamis
El Kharash
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ALAM EL SAWANI
ALAM EL JAMAUS
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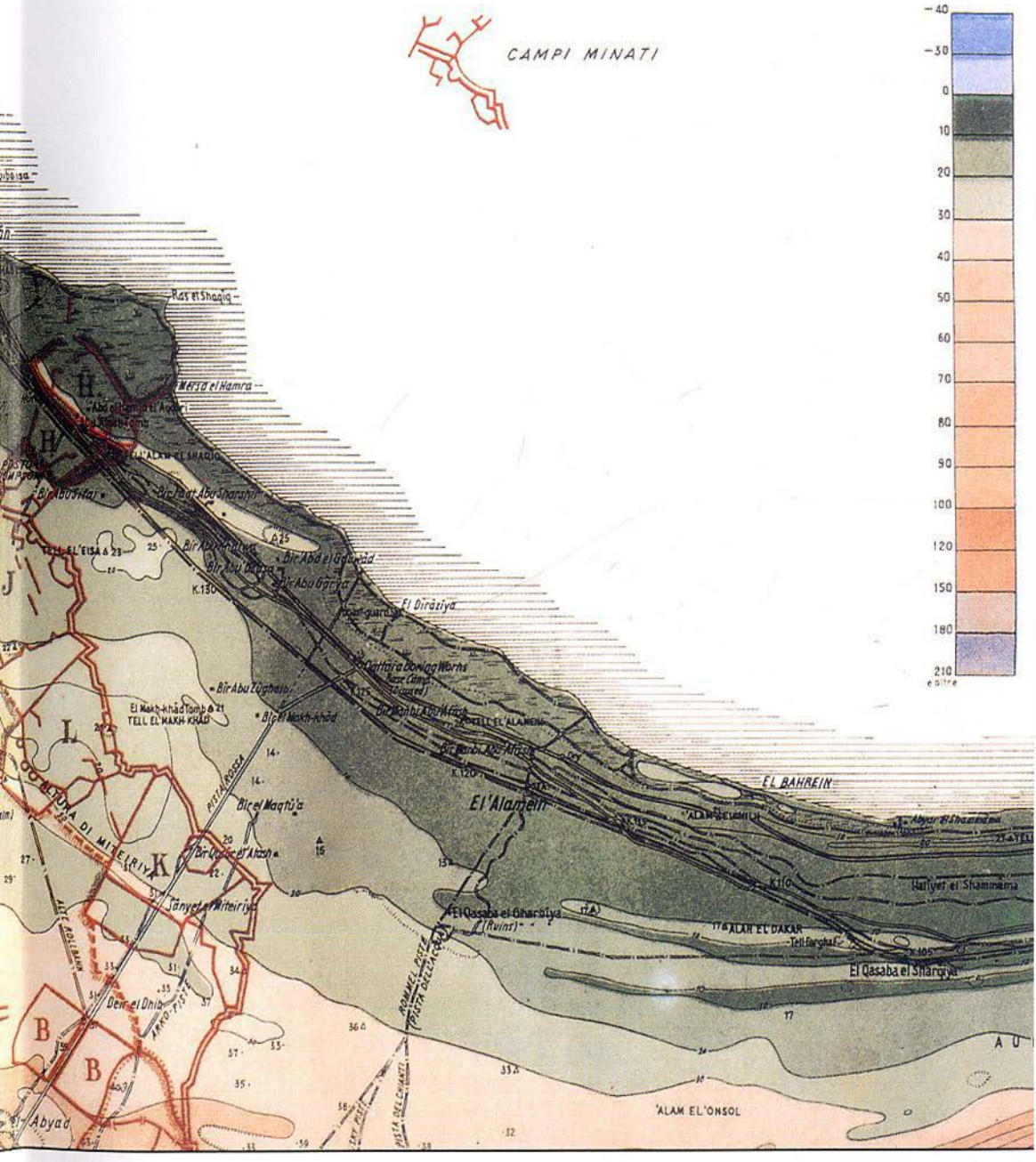
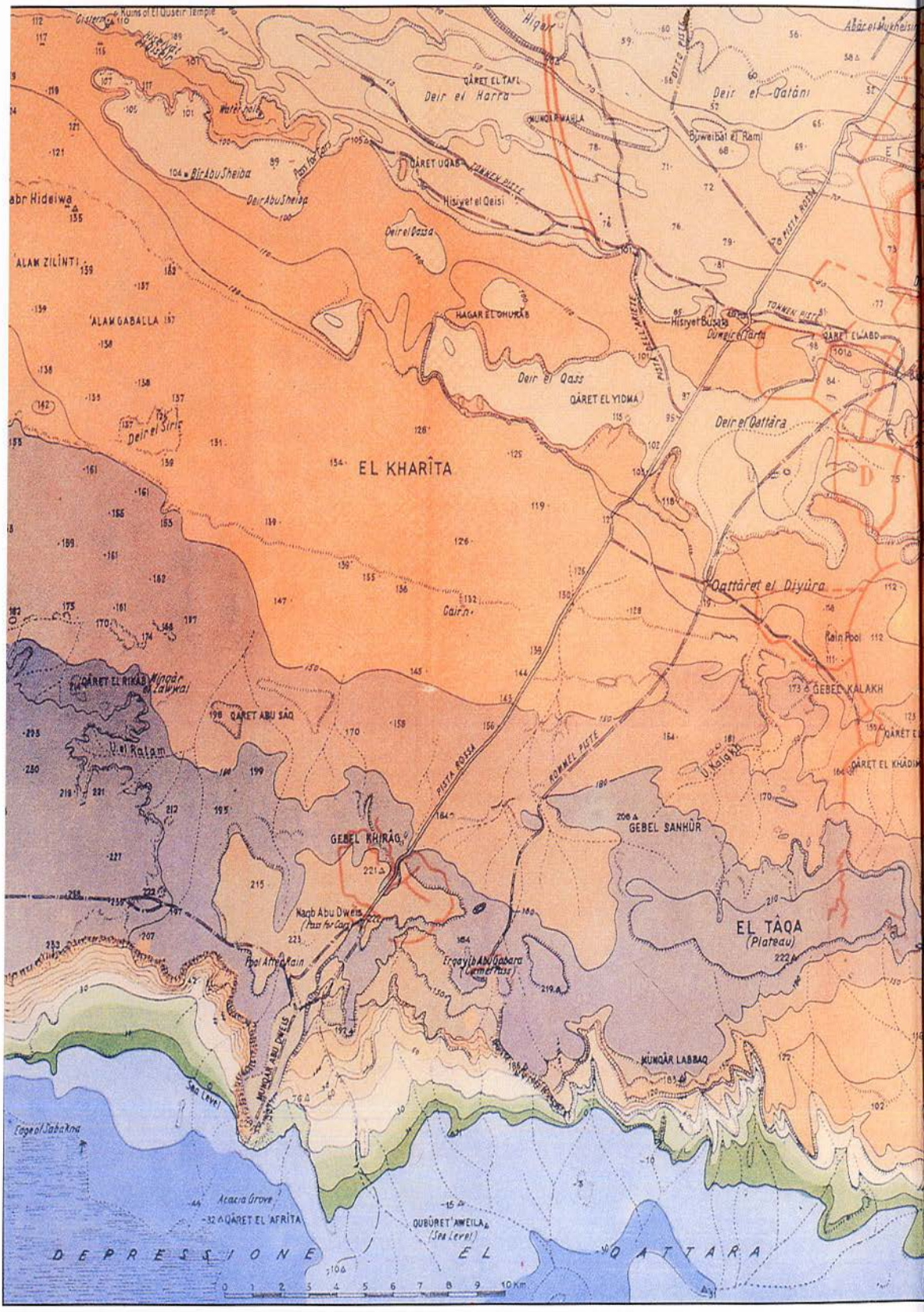
ALAM EL RAKB
ALAM EL TALIB
ALAM EL ABD
ALAM EL KAMIL

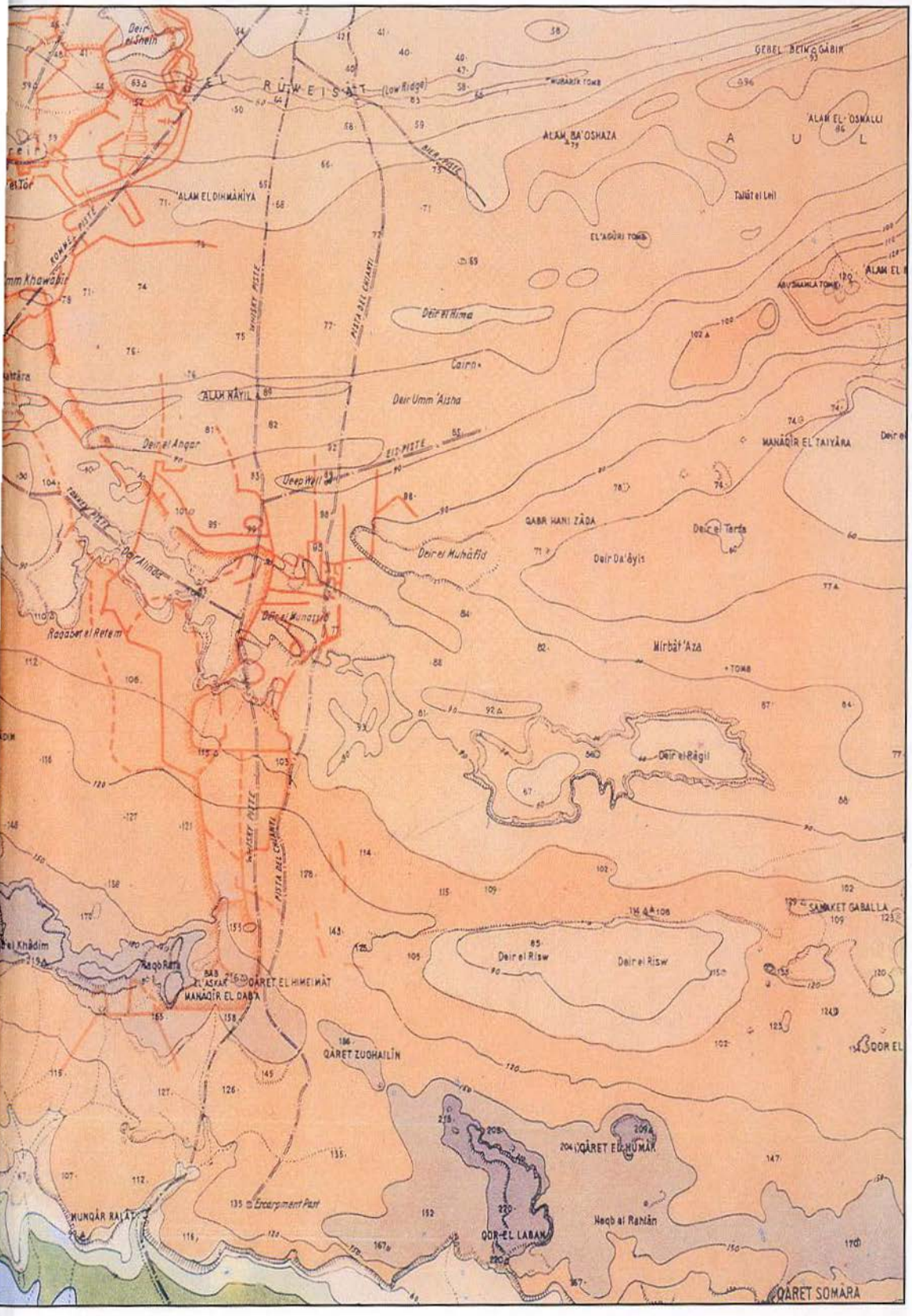
LA BATTAGLIA DI EL ALAMEIN
(23 OTTOBRE – 4 NOVEMBRE 1942)

LE POSIZIONI ITALO-TEDESCHE DI EL ALAMEIN
(TERRENO, VIABILITÀ, CAMPI MINATI)

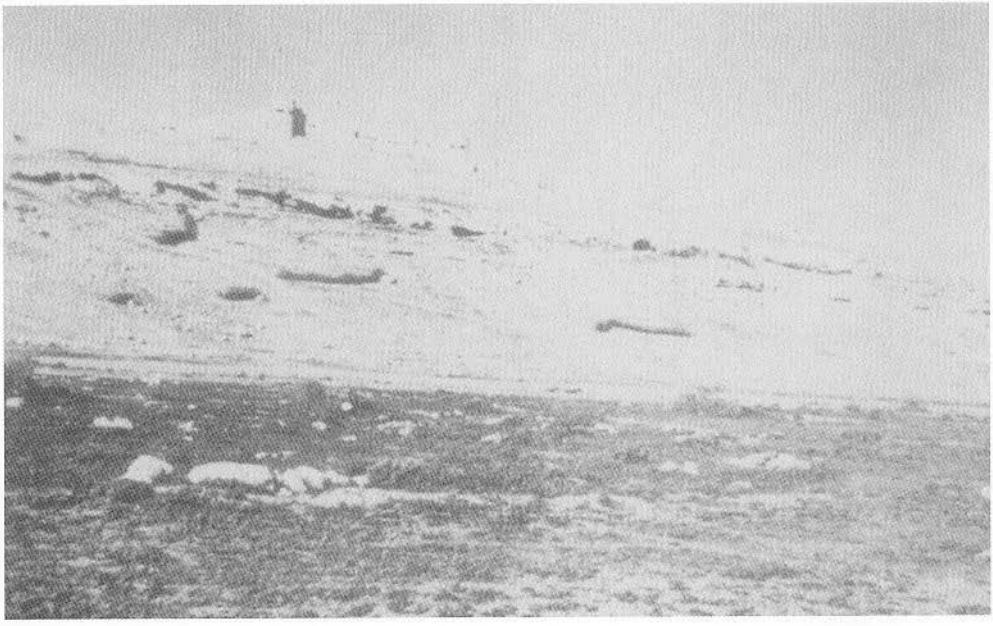




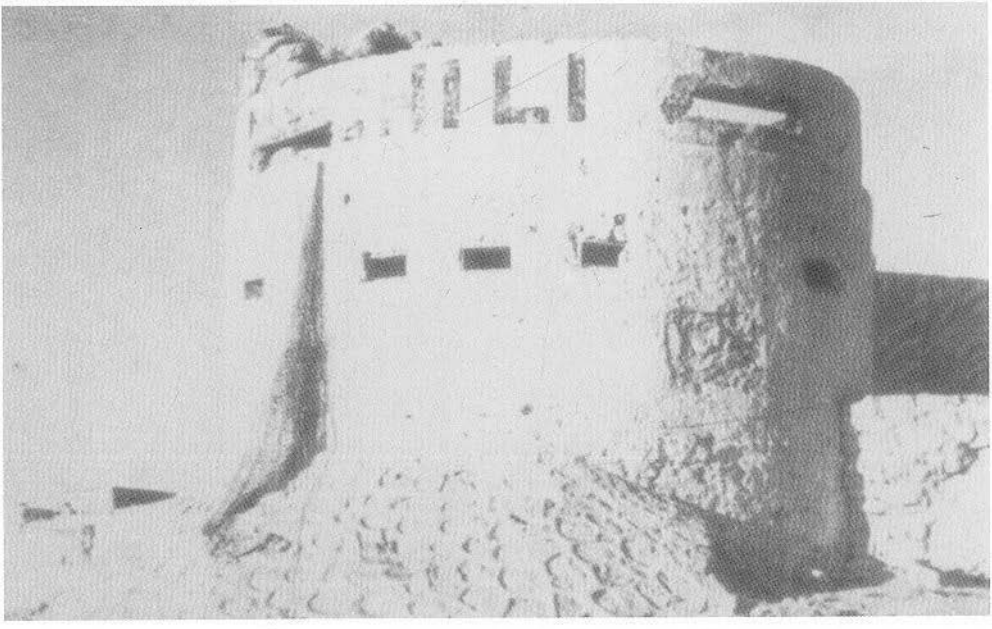
Kuins of El Quseir Temple
Deir el Harra
QÂRET EL TAFL
MUNQÂR MAHLA
Deir el Qatâni
Buweibat el Rami
QÂRET UQAB
TONNEN PISTE
Hisiyet el Qeisi
Bir Abu Sheiba
Deir Abu Sheiba
Deir el Qassa
'ALAM ZILÎNTI
'ALAM GABALLA
HAGAR EL GHURÂB
Hisiyet Busasa
Duweir el Tarfa
QÂRET EL 'ABD
Deir el Qass
QÂRET EL YIDMA
Deir el Qattâra
Deir el Siriç
EL KHARÎTA
Qattâret el Diyûra
Cairn
Rain Pool
GEBEL KALAKH
QÂRET EL RIKÂB
Mingâr el Zawwai
QÂRET ABU SÂQ
U. el Ralam
PISTA ROSSA
ROMMEL PISTE
U. Kalakh
QÂRET EL KHÂDIM
GEBEL SANHÛR
GEBEL KHIRÂQ
Naqb Abu Dweis
(Pass for Cars)
Pool After Rain
Erqayib Abu Gabara
(Cairn Pass)
EL TÂQA
(Plateau)
MUNQÂR LABBAQ
MUNQÂR ABU DWEIS
Sea Level
Edge of Sabakha
Acacia Grove
QÂRET EL 'AFRÎTA
QUBÛRET 'AWEILA
(Sea Level)
DEPRESSIONE EL QATTARA
0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Km



Deir el Shein
EL RÛWEISÂT (Low Ridge)
GEBEL BEIN GÂBIR
'ALAM EL 'OSMALLI
ALAM BA'OSHAZA
A U L
'ALAM EL DIHMÂNÎYA
Tallât el Leil
EL'AGÛRI TOMB
ABU SHAMLA TOMB
Deir el Hima
Cairn
Deir Umm 'Aisha
ALAH NÂYIL
Deir el Anqar
EIS PISTE
Deep Well
MANÂQÎR EL TAIYÂRA
QABR HANI ZÂDA
Deir el Tarfa
Deir el Muhâfid
Deir Da'âyis
Deir Alinda
Deir el Munassid
Ragabet el Retem
Mirbât 'Aza
TOMB
Deir el Râgil
SAMAKET GABALLA
Deir el Risw
Deir el Risw
Raqb Rala
BAB EL'ASKAR
QÂRET EL HIMEIMÂT
MANÂQÎR EL DAB'A
QÂRET ZUGHAILÎN
QÂRET EL HUMÂR
Escarpment Past
MUNQÂR RALÂT
QOR EL LABAN
Naqb el Rahlân
QÂRET SOMÂRA



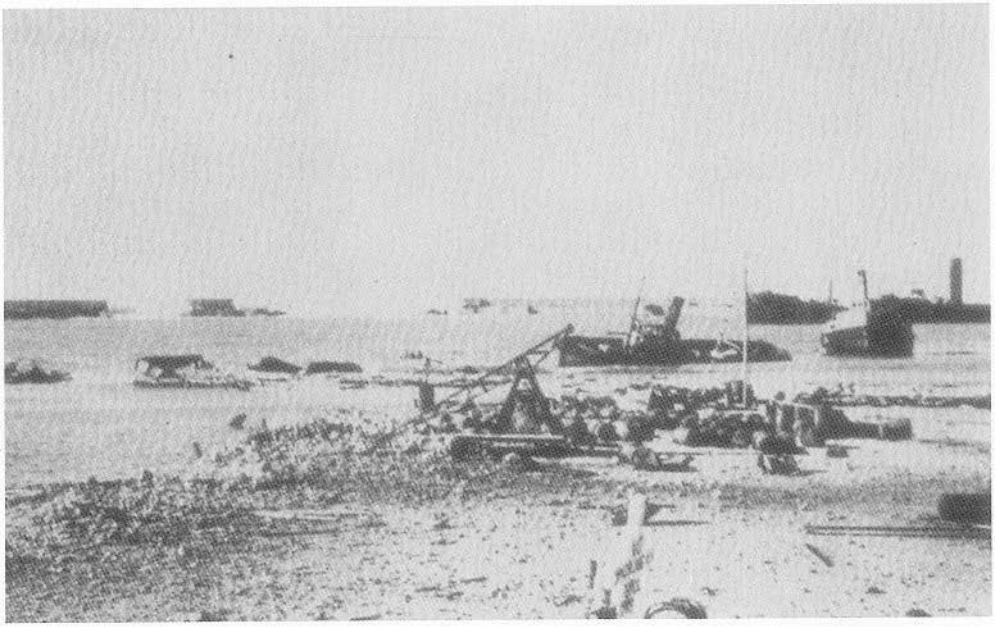
1. The fort at Sceleidima



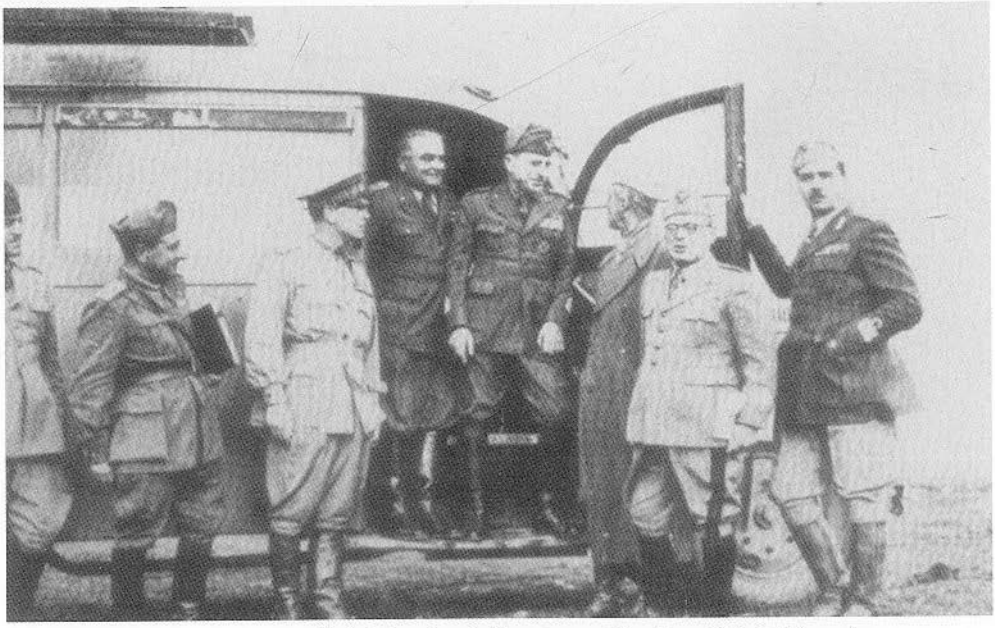
2. The fort at El Mechili

3. Gen. Bastico among the people of re-conquered Bengasi

4. Gen. Bastico visiting Bengasi port



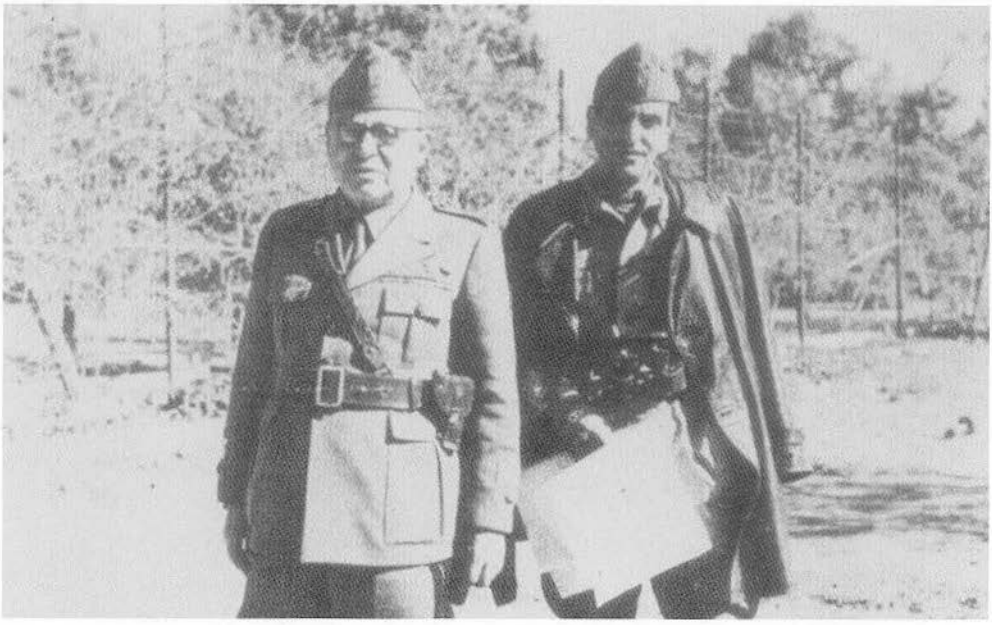
5. View of Bengasi port



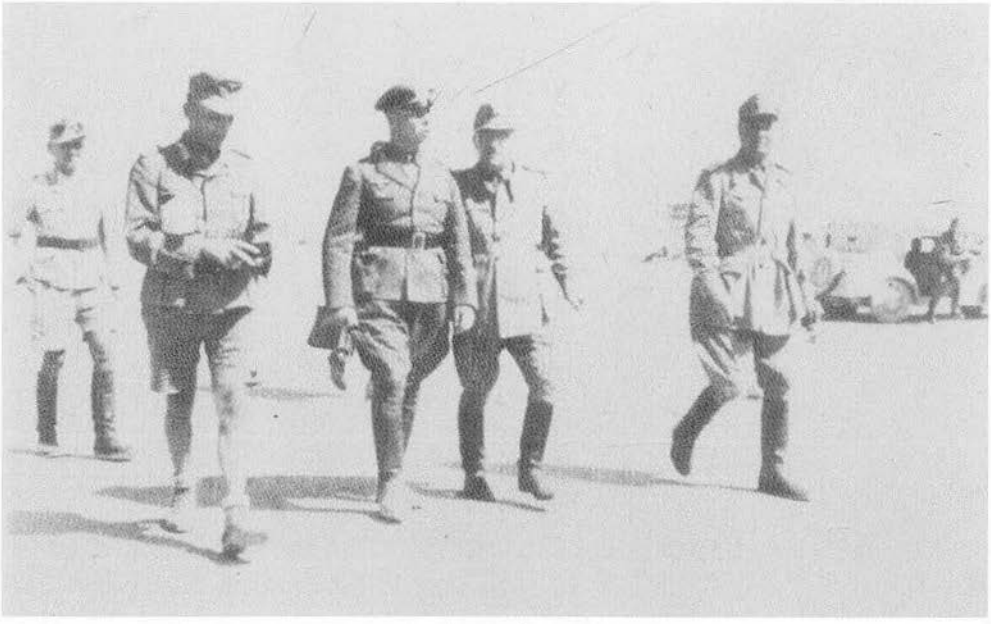
6. From left, Generals Nicolini, Marchesi, Gambara, Bastico, Calvi, Zingales

7. Rommel with Generals Gambara and Calvi

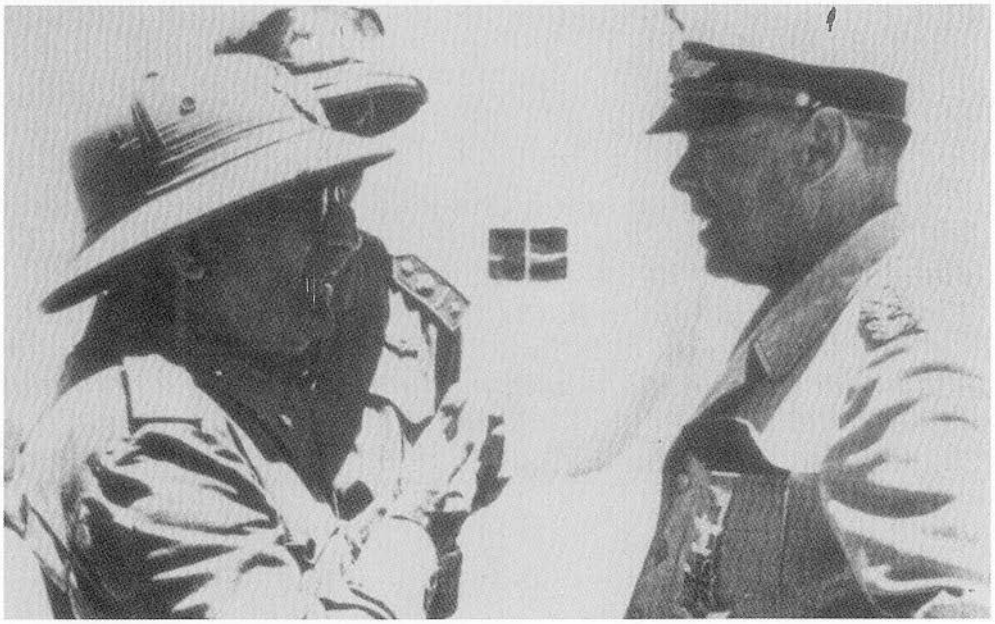
8. Rommel decorating Gen. Lombardi, commander of the *Brescia* Infantry Division, with the Iron Cross



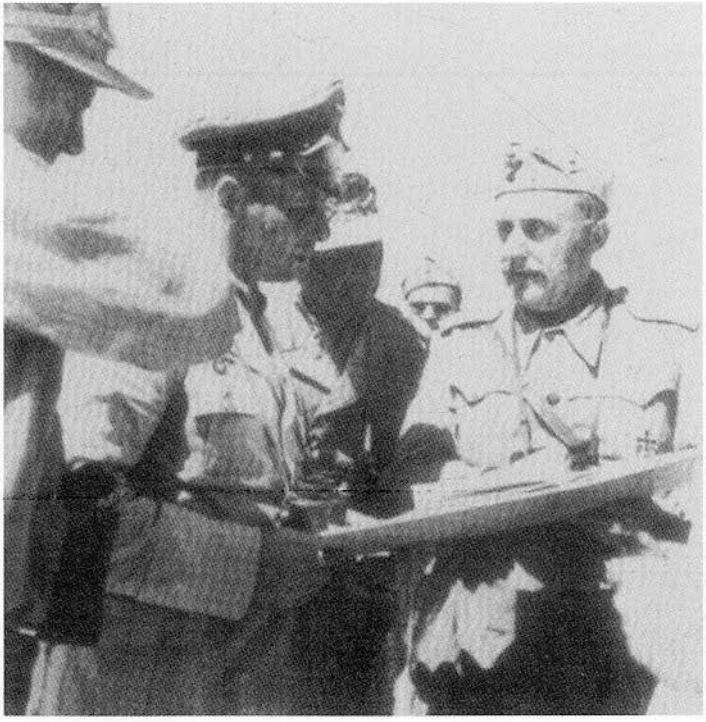
9. Gen. Francesco Zingales, C.A.M. commander from January to March 1942



10. Rommel, Cavallero and Barbasetti (end of June 1942)



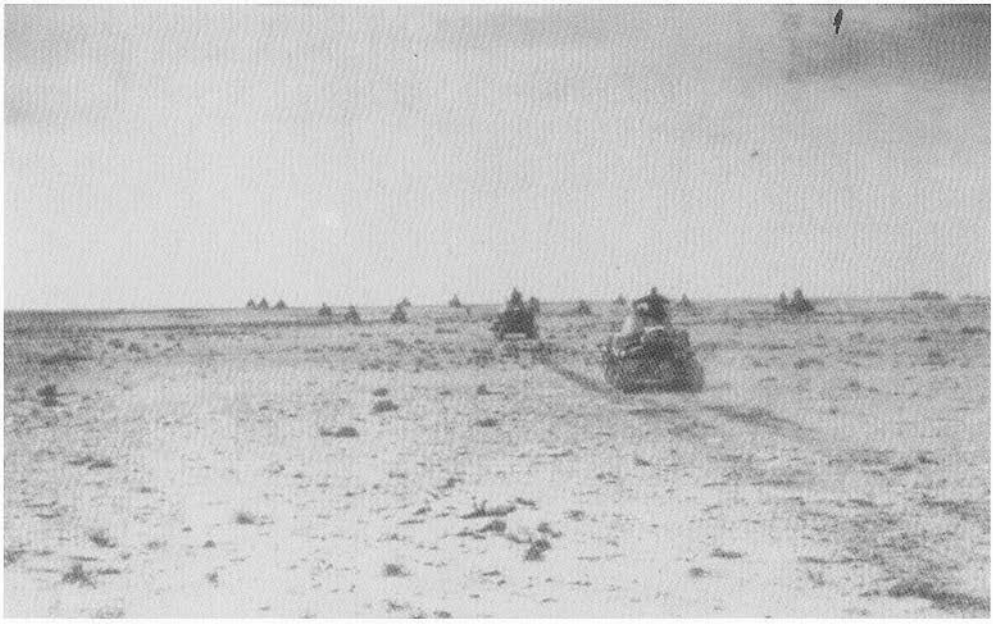
11. Cavallero and Kesselring (end of June 1942)



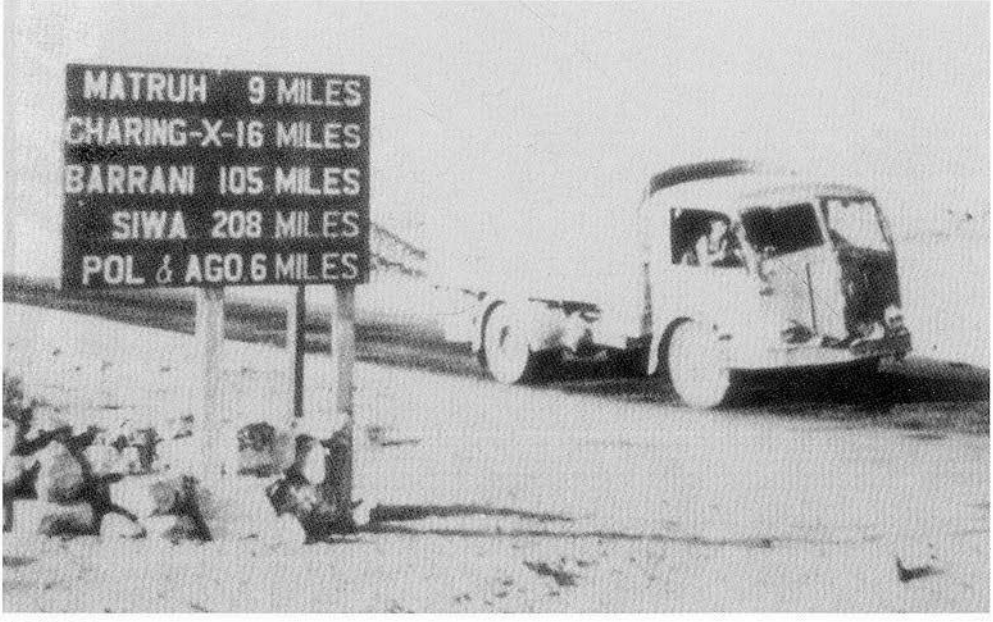
12. Rommel with Gen. Azzi during the battle at El-Gazala

13. Cavallero with Generals von Rintelen and Baldassarre

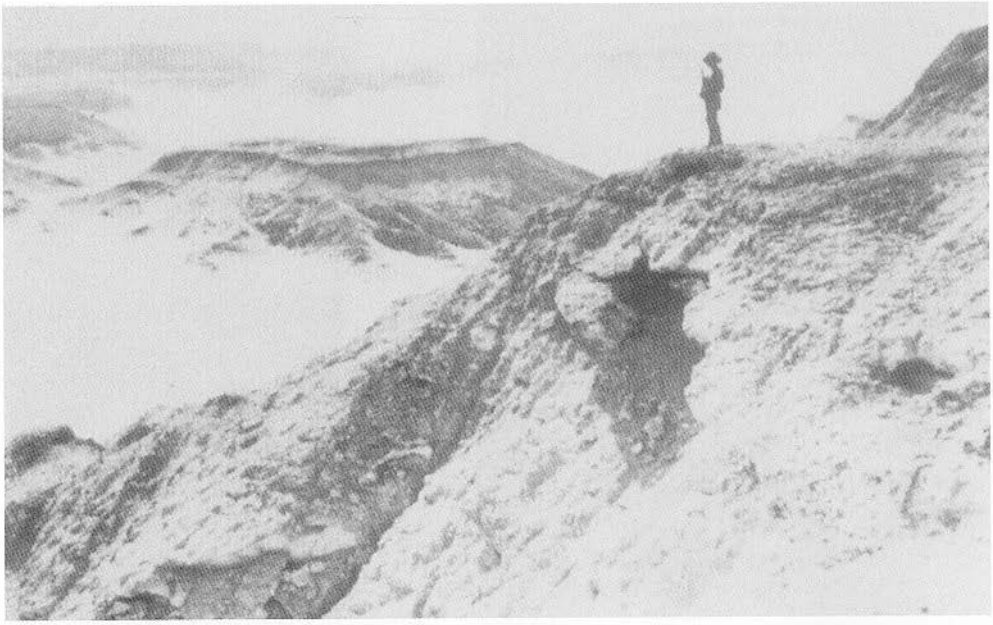
14. The *Littorio* Armoured Division moving towards Tobruk



15. The *Ariete* Armoured Division moving towards El-Mechili



16. In Egypt

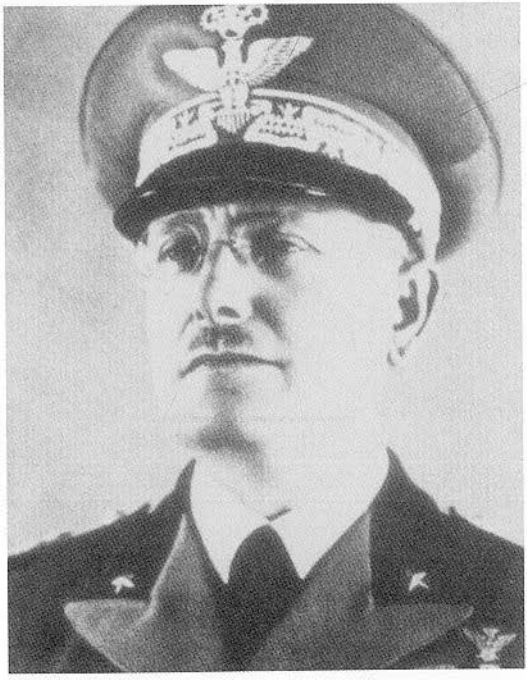


17. The El Qattara Depression

18. General Curio Barbasetti di Prun, chief of the Supreme Command Delegation

19. General Ettore Baldassarre, commander of the XX Army Corps from March to June 1942

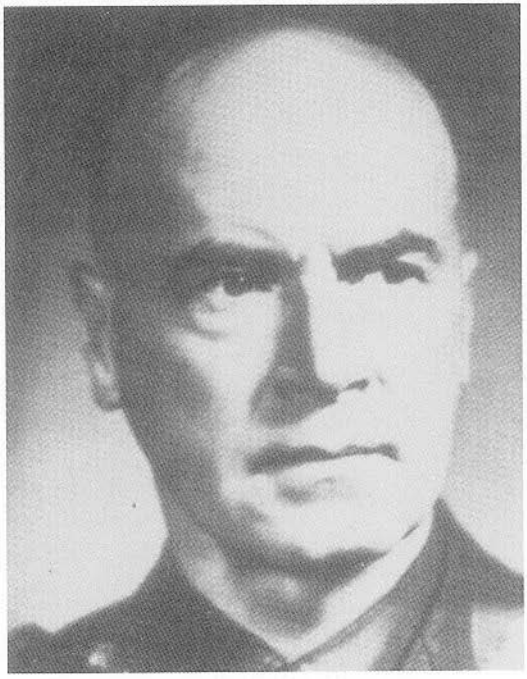
20. General Federico Ferrari Orsi, commander of the X Army Corps



21. General Giuseppe De Stefanis, first commander of the *Ariete* Armoured Division and then of the XX Army Corps

22. General Alessandro Gloria, commander of the *Bologna* Infantry Division

23. General Edmondo Nebbia, commander of the X Army Corps at El Alamein

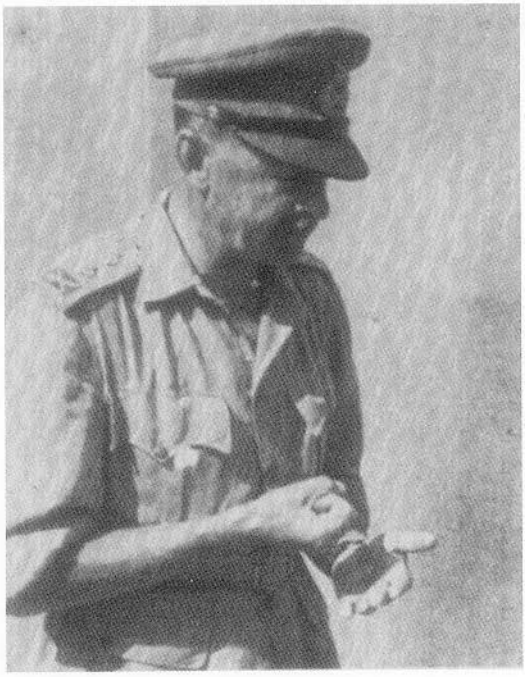


24. General Ludwig Crüwell
(Bundesarchiv picture)

25. General Wilhelm von Thoma
(Bundesarchiv picture)

26. General Walther Nehring
(Bundesarchiv picture)

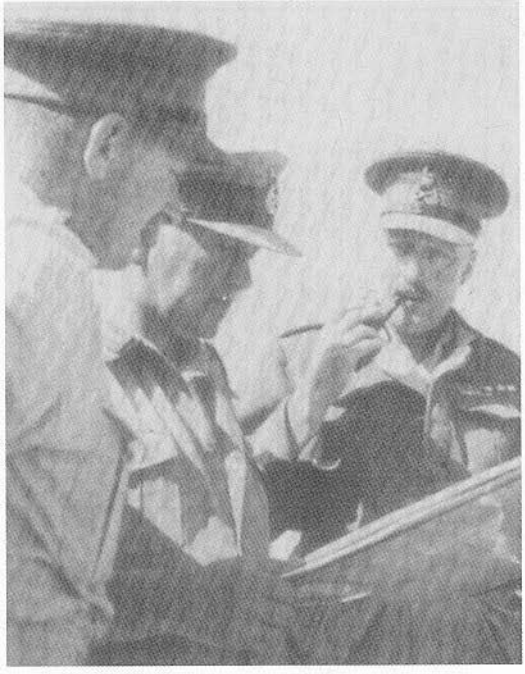
27. General Georg Stumme
(Bundesarchiv picture)



28. General Harold Alexander
(IWM picture)

29. General Bernard L. Montgomery
(IWM picture)

30. General Oliver Leese
(IWM picture)



31. General Neil M. Ritchie
(IWM picture)

32. General Alan Cunningham
(IWM picture)

33. General W.H.E. Gott
(IWM picture)

34. General Brian G. Horrocks
(IWM picture)

35. General A. Reade Godwin-Austen
(IWM picture)

36. General Claude J.E. Auchinleck
(IWM picture)

37. Admiral Andrew B. Cunningham
(IWM picture)

Necropoli Militare Italiana di QUOTA 33 (ALAMEIN, Egitto)
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